

TORCH TALK

COLLECTION

volume one







PRO WRESTLING TORCH PRESENTS

Torch Talk Collection

VOLUME ONE



Chris Adams	2
James Beard	4
Eric Bischoff	6
Larry Cameron	14
Dennis Coraluzzo	16
Jim Cornette	17
Chris Cruise	35
Paul E. Dangerously	43
Ted DiBiase	50
Shane Douglas	52
Derrick Dukes	53
Bill Eadie	54
Kip Frey	60
Verne Gagne	64
Eddie Gilbert	66
Tod Gordon	72
Road Warrior Hawk	79

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CHRIS ADAMS

"Gentleman" Chris Adams has been a mainstay in Texas for the majority of the last decade. A native of England, he came to the U.S. as a pro wrestler and has at times been the most popular and at other times the most hated wrestler in Texas. His feud with Jimmy Garvin including valets Sunshine and Precious lit up World Class Championship Wrestling at its peak in the mid-'80s. His subsequent turn and feud with the Von Erichs heated Texas fans more than the sun. He later defeated Rick Rude to win the World Class Hvt. Title. Except for a brief stint in Bill Watts's UWF, he has made Texas wrestling his mainstay. In the following "Torch Talk" interview conducted on Nov. 1, 1990, Adams talks about his past, present, and what he hopes will be a successful future as both a wrestler and a promoter.

Wade Keller: How did you originally get involved in pro wrestling?

Chris Adams: I used to go to the matches and watch Dynamite Kid, partner of Davey Boy in the British Bulldogs. I was in judo for fourteen years before that and then I went on to have a friend called Jackie Turpin. Jackie Turpin is a boxer. He was boxer of the year in England. His uncle is Randolph Turpin. Randolph Turpin was the World Middleweight Boxing Champion way



Chris Adams

Jerry Wilson

back. He lived in a town near where we were born. It was just about 15 miles away in a place called Rugby. He beat Sugar Ray Robinson a long time ago. He turned from boxing to pro wrestling. He was a personal friend of mine. I went to several wrestling shows with him. At the time I was doing judo and didn't particularly like professional wrestling, but the promoter in England, Max Crabtree, asked me if I wanted to start wrestling. At first, I said no, but then I agreed to do it. And I've never looked back.

Keller: How did you end up in Texas's World Class Wrestling?

Adams: I started in 1978. I came from England in 1981 to Los Angeles. So I did it for almost three years and decided I wanted to come to America. In L.A. I worked for Mike LaBell. I worked for him for a while and took several trips to Mexico and Japan through Mike LaBell. I came from a small town in England to L.A. Now that was culture shock. Then I went from L.A. to Portland. That was my first ever American territory and I hated it. England to L.A. was culture shock, but I thought the rest of America was like L.A. Then when I went to Portland, Oregon, it was kind of like going back to the sticks and I hated that. I was there about ten months. Then I had the opportunity to come to Dallas. As I came to Dallas, of course, World Class was just starting to take off for the first time.

Keller: Was there a time when you worked in Texas when you would have liked to move on to the WWF or the NWA, or have you always been content in Texas?

Adams: I'm never content, but I don't want to be just a wrestler on the road. To me, everything is relative. Money's relative, importance is relative. Everything's relative. And to be a wrestler on the road is a single job. To get into the business side of it—I trained for four years to be an architect. I went to school and have always been into business one way or another. I'm not content to just be a wrestler or somebody's pawn in a chess game, going from town to town bustin' my ass. Unless the price is right, of course, you know. I wanted something more than that, so I started to market myself. Now we're into promotion and promoting other people, other wrestlers, and promoting shows. Of course, the next step is we're working with a lot of sponsors. And the next step is to get my own TV show.

Keller: Many years down the line, do you see yourself getting out of the ring and being just a promoter?

Adams: If I'm too old, yeah. Everything is made so much easier if you're popular as a wrestler—the promotion, the TV, the advertisement, the sponsorships. Everything is so much easier because people relate to your name. And, of course, I do like wrestling. I love the sport.

Keller: At this point, what is the most memorable era or moment of your career?

Adams: I think one of my most favorite parts of my career was when I came to Dallas, I had been here maybe six or eight months, and I started to have a feud against Jimmy Garvin. That was like my first break. Another memorable time was when I joined up with Gino Hernandez as the Dynamic Duo. Of course, another time was when I won the world championship from Rick Rude. My career has moved on and now I'm into the promotion and business side of it. Like I said, everything is relative and this is just a step up from the business.

Keller: How about training wrestlers? Will you continue to do that?

Adams: There's a lot of talent out there. I want to carry on training wrestlers. I'm doing it slightly different now. We will accept anyone who wants to be a wrestler, but then when we get them in the doors, we tell them what they need if they want to be successful. If a guy has to put on 65 pounds, we'll tell him. And if he needs to lose 100, we'll tell him. But you'd be surprised, it's really 90 percent in the mind. If someone is reasonably tall enough, and they have the frame, and they really want to be a wrestler, but they're not in shape, it takes two or three years, but eventually if they really want that, they'll make it. Steve Austin, of course, who has been nominated for rookie of the year, came from our school.

Keller: Did he start in your school?

Adams: He sure did. He started in our school and went all the way through.

Keller: Is there any period of your career that you regret or look down upon?

Adams: Really, none. I find it all, even the bad times, were an experience. I just believe experience is what you learn from.

Keller: What do you attribute to the fall of World Class Wrestling over the past few years?

Adams: Bad management.

Keller: Do you think World Class, which actually had a head start on expansion, could have been as big as the WWF is today?

Adams: Oh, definitely. Especially today from what I've learned. You know, at that particular time, I didn't know what was going on except that everything was good. But when I look back and see the sponsorship that Fritz Von Erich missed and I see the opportunities that he missed, and the openings, I feel that they missed out big time. I feel they tried to do everything on their own when they should have gone corporate. So I really think that they missed out big time.

Keller: What are your thoughts on the Von Erich family? Do you feel Fritz put tremendous pressure on his sons leading to some of the

problems they've had?

Adams: Yes, definitely. I think they're a very strong spirited family. And without them, I possibly wouldn't have been where I am now. I really thank them for that. On the other hand, we all grow up, and there comes a time when you have to leave and go on your own and move forward. So, I can never be anybody's slave.

Keller: Do you think the Von Erichs will feel you owe them?

Adams: I think they feel everybody does.

Keller: What do you think of Kevin Von Erich's recent attempts at promoting?

Adams: I think it's pathetic. I think that he should be more open-minded to business, more trusting, and realize his position and situation in the business world and work from there. Instead of thinking that the Von Erichs rule the world.

Keller: When the NWA bought Bill Watts's UWF, why didn't you stay with the NWA once the merger took place?

Adams: Well, when the NWA took over the UWF, there were two ways to look at it. There was the wrestling fans' way, seeing the two wrestling organizations get together and then there was the business way to look at it. The NWA idea was to take over the UWF, eat up and use their television and all their contacts, and dissolve the UWF with the NWA keeping their strongest stars. Like I said, I don't like being a pawn in other people's chess games.

Keller: What are your thoughts on Dusty Rhodes, especially at that time?

Adams: I love him. I think he's great. I think Dusty is a character, a businessman, and I think he is very, very smart in this business. If you notice his track record, he's always done well and always looked after himself.

Keller: Would you like to work with him some day on the promotional end?

Adams: Oh, yeah, I'd love to.

Keller: What is coming up for Chris Adams in the next few months? Mainly building L&A Promotions?

Adams: Go back to the basics and start up small. And like I said I started from the bottom. I consider the bottom being a wrestler. Then going into marketing, promotion, and now the next step is TV. Texas has been my home away from home. I would like to have my nucleus in Texas. I think that the people of Texas should have their own wrestling organization and give these people exactly what they want. Their own individual little wrestling circuit to start out with their own TV. There's so much wrestling on television with the WWF and NWA. It would be nice to have a "Texas Wrestling Federation." I think that wrestling will eventually go back to the regionals. I really do, and I'd like to be one of the first to get it, especially here in Texas.

Keller: Do you have ambitions to expand once the region gets going and possibly move into pay-per-view?

Adams: Sure, what I would like to do is start in Texas, use Texas as our hub or nucleus, and build outward gradually and slowly.

Keller: What are your thoughts on Percy Pringle?

Adams: Percy has been up and down. I respect him as a businessman. He's a lot smarter than people give him credit for.

Keller: Bill Watts?

Adams: Bill Watts was a very, very smart man. He was always good to me. He did some people wrong, I know that. But he was always very good to me. What I appreciate about Bill was his truthfulness, his open mind, but also his ability to tell you what he thought. I always got along well with him. I think he was a genius in this business. I also think he got out at the exactly right time and made a business killing.

Keller: Eddie Gilbert?

Adams: Eddie Gilbert is a very clever man, too. He makes up for his size with his brain. He is a smart businessman in a wrestling way, a booker's way.

Keller: Gino Hernandez?

Adams: There was only one Gino. Gino was Gino. He was a character and I loved him. I thought he was a personality and there's never been anybody like him since?

Keller: If he had not died, do you think you would still be working with him in some way?

Adams: I'm sure we would have.

Keller: Kerry Von Erich?

Adams: There's only one Kerry and I've always loved Kerry. A lot of people say bad things about the Von Erichs. Like I say, I just speak the truth or the way I feel. Kerry has got a charisma about him that nobody can ever take away and I consider him to be one of the leaders in wrestling. He has everything that anyone who's into marketing would want. The body, the charisma, the look. He's been a good friend of mine for a long time.

Keller: Hulk Hogan?

Adams: I have been to Japan with him a couple of times. I think he is the ultimate wrestler if there ever was one. In fact, I was at the Rocky III shooting in L.A. with him. We were one of the extras and, of course, he was against Stallone. I always remember Terry as being a really, really nice guy.

Keller: What are the ups and downs of touring Japan?

Adams: I love travelling and studying cultures in every culture. I love the Japanese culture. It's

just a trip to go there, period. I didn't respect it the first couple of times I went. I think at the time I was immature on my outlook and only saw the things that were immediately around me. I think you grow up as time goes on. Like I say, I don't want to be a wrestler on the road, but I would like to have at least one trip a year there now. In fact, I'm starting to let people know that.

Keller: Do you see the current state of wrestling as healthy in comparison to 1983 or 1985?

Adams: No, not at all. I consider it oversaturated. I also consider it a changing business. It's the same as everything's changing. This is 1990 and I believe we need to give the people a little bit more than the way wrestling was in 1950. Some of these people say wrestling isn't the way it used to be, but of course it isn't. Life isn't. Things change and they change from week to week, and especially year to year.

Keller: Have there been any changes over the years in wrestling that you wish you could take back?

Adams: I would like to see the business protected a lot more than it is. Protected in so much as people have tried to expose it for what it isn't. Wrestling is not fake in any way whatsoever. It's a real business. I don't like that side of it, the way people try to knock it. They should respect it as both a business and an art. An entertainment sport in its own right. There's nothing like it. I get guys coming to me saying they can bench press 500 pounds or they can run the 100 yard dash in so many seconds. It doesn't matter. That's only a very minute, small part of professional wrestling. To be a good wrestler, you have to be a package. Being a good wrestler in this business is the only edge you can have in this business.

Keller: As far as protecting the business, what do you think of the Wrestling Observer's Dave Meltzer?

Adams: I think he's a leech. I think all reporters have a tendency to live off of other people's creativeness. But I think it's a good deal he has, he's on to a good little business. And these days I really think he reports the facts more than his own personal thoughts. So I like (the *Wrestling Observer*) now better than I used to because I really felt that he didn't understand the business before. I think he understands it now.

Keller: Do you feel there is a place for all of the various approaches to covering professional wrestling?

Adams: Sure, I really do. I think it should be compared to all the other major sports, football, boxing, basketball, and see the way they market and write about both the games, the athletes, the personal lives, the business structure, everything. I think there's a lot of ways to do it.

JAMES BEARD

James Beard, 42, is a professional wrestling referee. Referees tend to be a forgotten commodity in pro wrestling. Few people think about or understand the role of a referee in a wrestling match. Unless the referee is getting knocked down, few times is he noticed. In this "Torch Talk" interview conducted Feb. 28, 1993, Beard from his home in Dallas, Tex. talks about his international decade long career as a referee and gives insight on what he sees is his role when in the wrestling ring.

Wade Keller: First, how did you personally get involved in the wrestling business?

James Beard: I had some friends who were in the business who I worked out with. It snowballed from there. I was in the music business, playing in a band, writing and recording music. I gradually gravitated into the business. I worked part-time for a while and it started to be more of a demand for me, so I dropped everything else and here I am. I was a wrestling fan since I was a kid. I used to watch the wrestling out of Dallas at the Sportatorium. I remember Pepper Gomez. He was one of my first idols. And the Kozak Brothers, of course Johnny Valentine and Fritz (Von Erich).

Keller: How did you train or learn to be a referee?

Beard: I worked out with some of the wrestlers. There were some things here and there. Some of it I learned from watching. I watched Bronco Lubich. I watched David Manning; I liked the way he worked. People like that. I thought about being a referee from a young age. I was an athlete. I played college basketball, even though I was only 5-9. I always thought if I was big enough, I would get into the business. I never thought I would be big enough, though, even though there are some guys smaller than I am in the business. Being an athlete, I was interested in what was going on. I thought if I was in the business, being a referee would be a part I could assume and I thought I could do a good job at it because I knew what was going on.

Keller: Were you surprised by anything you learned? I assume going in you were familiar with the inner-workings of the business.

Beard: I still learn things. I've learned gradually. It has occurred to me how important a referee is, how valuable it is to have somebody in the ring who knows what's going on and knows how to get over what's happening. I guess to some degree I always assumed the referee played a big role, but I didn't realize how much so until I got involved and learned more about it.

Keller: What is the varying extent of the role the referee plays in a match? How does it change between a match involving veterans vs. a match involving rookies?

Beard: It does change. Even with the veterans in there, they still depend on you quite a bit because you're trying to get over what they're trying to do. Whether it is the heel or the babyface, you're trying to get over whatever they are trying to do. Even with the really experienced wrestlers, they will tell you they would prefer to have a really experienced referee and someone who knows what they're doing in there so they can work with them. In a rookie match or a match with boys who are less experienced, you are even more important because you pretty much have to run things. To some degree you are teaching them at the same time. I work with a lot of young boys here in Dallas. In fact I do a couple of shows here that we run basically just so some of the younger guys can get some work. I spend a lot of time in the ring trying to help them out, pushing them along. I think they appreciate that.

Keller: Do you take pride in the quality of the matches you referee?

Beard: Absolutely. I feel as good or as bad, depending on how the match is as the wrestlers themselves do. I feel if the match goes well and it goes over, I feel I did my part and I'm just as satisfied with that as the guys who were actually wrestling.

Keller: What are some of the things you can do to improve a match involving inexperienced wrestlers?

Beard: With a rookie, a lot of times they get in the ring and they get excited and you need to slow them down. That's the main thing with a young guy—they try to do too much, too fast. You try to settle them down a little bit and guide them a little bit. You want to try to keep them from doing something they are going to look bad at. There are a lot of intricate things that you learn in there. It's hard to say in words exactly because you have to be in that situation, but you get in with the young guy, you try to know what their abilities are and you try to guide them in that direction and keep them from doing too much and making the match look bad or keep them from hurting themselves.

Keller: How can you improve a match with experienced veterans?

Beard: With the veterans, if you're in there with someone who really knows what they are doing, basically you're in there to try to accentuate. You're not telling them what to do because they know what to do. Occasionally, you say something or something that pops into your head and you say something and it works. But, basically, you get in there and try to put over whatever is happening.

Keller: For you, what is the best part of

being involved in the wrestling business? Is it being in the ring or is it associating with the wrestlers afterward or something else?

Beard: It is the matches. Absolutely. I never have been star struck. I have been in the ring with, I guess, some of the best wrestlers in the world here and in Japan. For instance, Randy Savage in Japan—all the WWF boys for that matter when they worked for the SWS. I worked for SWS in Japan through (Kazou) Sakurada ("Kendo Nagasaki"), my connection here in Texas. I worked for Demolition over there, Davey Boy, Kerry Von Erich, Hulk Hogan. I've gotten to know a lot of the people who are big stars personally. That means a lot. I've gotten to be pretty good friends with some of them, even if it is just short-term. I've never been intimidated because I've always felt I could hold up my end. If everything went well, then we kind of worked as a team and the match goes over.

Keller: When you watch wrestling on television, do you find yourself paying close attention to the referee sometimes?

Beard: Occasionally I do. I know some of the guys from the other organizations. Yeah, I do. I watch them to see if there are some things they do that I can pick up. I can't think of anything too specific. I like to see a referee who is in charge. He doesn't just stand there and wait until the thing is over with, make the count, and raise the guy's hand. I like to see a referee who is involved in a match. Most of the wrestlers who know what they're talking about believe the same thing. I don't mean taking over a match or overshadowing a wrestler, but it's accentuating and trying to make whatever is happening more appealing to the fans. I think if you talk to any of the wrestlers who know anything in this business, they will tell you it takes three people.

Keller: Who are some of the referees regarded in the industry as the better referees?

Beard: Well, you know, when you talk to the wrestlers and from watching on TV, I never knew him, but Tommy Young was always the guy I was impressed with when I was younger. Most of the boys named him as one of the best referees they ever worked with. There is a line you have to walk. Tommy walked it. I try not to step over it. Occasionally, you're in danger of stepping over it. There are times when (a referee might make himself too much the center of attention). I hope I don't do that. I can't say Tommy Young never did it, he may have, but I think a referee has to be visible and has to be part of the match. You have to let your authority be known.

Keller: Do referees, from your experience, form separate cliques or are they just one of the boys?

Beard: I never have formed a separate clique. I have a little bit of a unique situation because I

have worked in Japan as much as anywhere. I still do. When you are over there, you become almost a family. That's how you get to know people pretty well. It's a little different in the States, where you go to the matches and then go home or go your own way. Some of the guys hang out together, some of them don't. I've never been one to hang out or go to bars in the States. But over in Japan, you are one of the few Americans, so you hang out together and get to know each other a lot better. I like that because of the personnel thing involved. Most of the time it has turned out to be a good thing.

Keller: Do you have more of a tendency to say hello to WWF or WCW referees when they are in town than saying hello to wrestlers, or is being a referee not a factor?

Beard: Well, you say hello to some of them. You have to have mutual respect with some of the guys. The WCW boys, I can't say I know all of them personally, but we all know each other from watching TV and kind of have a respect for each other. I have tremendous respect for the referees in WCW, all three of them. I've gone to a few shows of theirs. I spent a few days with Steve Austin. They were very friendly with me and we got along well. We didn't hang out or anything, but it was a mutual respect, I think. When the WWF's been in town, I've said hi to them. I can't say I'm friends with any of them. Earl Hebner I think is a good referee. Basically, he's the best they have in New York.

Keller: Are there any referees that stand out in your mind as not being referees of quality?

Beard: You're gonna get me in trouble, aren't you. I like to try to be positive. All three of the referees in Atlanta, I really respect. They do a good job. Randy Anderson, Mike Atkins, and Nick Patrick. I really like the way Mike works in the ring. He is a little bit more aggressive. All three of them do that, but I really like the way Mike works in the ring. And Earl Hebner is a pro. Basically, the referees in New York don't have much of a role. They for the most part stand around and when the match is over, they raise the hand. I have never understood why unless they are told to be that way. They don't put that kind of emphasis on the referee there. I don't understand that. I like to see referees participate in a match and help make the match better. I think Earl does that and all three WCW guys do that.

Keller: Would you ever like to work full-time in the States for one of the two major U.S. companies?

Beard: I have some friends in the office in New York and I think if the situation were right, there's a possibility that that could happen. I don't know. I'm not in a position to say definitively, yes.

Keller: Do you believe you are on par with

the better referees in this country?

Beard: Oh, yeah, I don't doubt that at all. I think if you talk to the boys, they would say the same. In fact, if you talked to the boys, if it were up to them, I would be in either one of the organizations. I'm not trying to put myself over, but when they talk to me, I think they're being honest when they tell me that.

Keller: If somebody wanted to become a referee, how would they go about doing that?

Beard: The way the business is now, I would recommend them not doing that. You have to really be interested, I think. A lot of people have the opinion that a referee is just somebody who stands in and it can be anybody. I think a referee has to be an athlete, first, just like the boys. The referee needs to have an understanding, not just of the business, but an understanding of wrestling. I think you have to know the moves, what the holds do, the terminology, of course. There is so much you have to learn. Then you have to learn the psychology of the business. And you have to understand that psychology in order to really be able to put over what you are trying to do, what the people in charge are trying to do. So many of them don't understand that, they really don't have a grasp of that. That's the part of it that bothers me sometimes.

Keller: Do you have a most memorable moment in wrestling?

Beard: There are probably 10 or 15 matches I could name, and a lot of them probably in Japan because I like the way wrestling is done over there. I like that style. The match that stands out in my mind is one match over there when a guy named Naoki Sano and Jeff Jarrett faced The Rockers. I remember the match lasted 20 or 25 minutes and we were all completely exhausted when it was over. I love that kind of match. Every time we go over there, I see something like that, so it's hard to name just one match.

Keller: How long do you want to be involved in the wrestling business and do you have plans to move on to anything else?

Beard: It's hard to say. I'm open to anything. I'd like to make a little money in this before it's over (laughs). I'd like to do it here. I guess I would like to do it in the States. I'm not unhappy in Dallas. I like working with the people in Global. I have some input and I enjoy that part of it. I know a lot of the wrestlers here personally. I have kind of a soft spot here in Dallas for that. But I guess I would like to step into the lime-light here in the States before my refereeing career ends.

Keller: Who do you admire who you have worked with in the business?

Beard: Going to Japan a lot, I worked with all of the New York (WWF) boys. I admired how professional they were. At least most of them were that way. I got along with almost all of

There are times when (a referee might make himself too much the center of attention). I can't say Tommy Young never did it. I think a referee has to be visible and has to be part of the match. You have to let your authority be known.

them. I enjoyed working with people like Randy Savage and Barry Darsow (Repoman) and Bryan Adams (Crush) and Tito Santana. Just people in the business who I know appreciate what's going on. Shawn Michaels really loves the business. He and I sat down in Japan one time after the matches—just he and I, the rest of the boys were somewhere else—and that was the first time I realized how much he loved what he was doing and loved the business. Those were the types of people I enjoy working with. There are people in Dallas who feel the same way, but haven't had a chance to show it.

Keller: Have you run across anyone whom you don't admire? A Manny Fernandez-type or something?

Beard: How did you ever come up with that? (laughs) Actually, I have never had a problem getting along personally with anybody that I've worked with. I think I can adjust to things well enough. But people like Manny—in fact, I just got back from a tour of Japan with him and there were some problems—you don't enjoy being around problems. I like to see everybody working together as a team. If you have somebody there who is trying to put other people down and being antagonistic at times, that takes away from the enjoyment of the business. Manny was probably the name I would have brought up. It's really not a personal thing with Manny because I could sit down and talk with Manny today and not have a problem with him. I have been in Japan with people who want to be something they're not, like a Paul Roma. Paul was an okay guy, but just had an attitude. Manny, if you can get past the bull, is an okay guy. This business is full of egos. Of course, you have to have a certain amount of ego to do anything in sports or entertainment. I try to accentuate the positive and for the most part, it has helped me get through a few things. But I hate bad attitudes, even with people I like, like John Tatum. I really like John—I just finished working with him this afternoon—but he doesn't care anymore. You can tell it. It comes through. I really like to see guys with talent who really care about the business. I understand how you can get jaded.

ERIC BISCHOFF

Eric Bischoff rose from being an admittedly mediocre pitch-man on WCW's announcing team to the number one man behind the day-to-day wrestling operations—all in less than a period of a year. Since then, he has changed the exterior of WCW, including improving production values, and added to the announcing crew. The interview was conducted via telephone Apr. 6, 1994 from WCW's offices. Bischoff talks about his rise to the top of WCW and some of the early changes he's made, other changes he'd like to make in WCW, defends himself against criticism, has some harsh words about another promotion, and reviews the wrestling press.

Keller: What is your current position and title with WCW?

Bischoff: My title is senior vice president/executive producer.

Keller: What are your responsibilities under those titles?

Bischoff: As the executive producer, I oversee all aspects of television production. As senior vice president, I oversee all of wrestling operations and a fair amount of business associated with it.



Eric Bischoff

Keller: On a day-to-day basis, are you involved with just about every major decision or are there some areas where you don't have much input?

Bischoff: I don't get much involved in accounting or merchandising or marketing, but that's probably about it.

Keller: Before entering WCW, what experience did you have? Was it pretty much your years in the AWA?

Bischoff: I started with the AWA in 1987 and my responsibilities with Verne were basically syndicating his wrestling show. We were syndicating that show nationally. We had distribution nationally in California, obviously throughout the Midwest. We had syndication and clearance down here in Georgia. So basically I was syndicating his show for about two years. That was my initial exposure into this business. My background has basically been in sales and marketing my whole life.

Keller: In what capacity?

Bischoff: I was a sales manager for a food distributor for a long time. I owned a construction company of my own. It was a construction company and underground irrigation company. We did a lot of commercial and industrial work. I was essentially involved in the sales and marketing of that company.

Keller: What was the impetus for you to initially get involved in pro wrestling? Personal connections, personal interest?

Bischoff: No, actually I had no connections at all in the business. I've always had a strong interest in professional wrestling. My real foot in the door, so to speak, was when I created a game, invented a game back in '86 and '87 called Ninja Star Wars with a good friend of mine. Essentially Ninja Star Wars was a game where two kids would wear kind of a felt or velcro type of vest and they'd have these little stars that they would throw at each other and the stars would stick to the vest. A buddy and I invented and created that game and found a Korean manufacturer. We packaged it all up and decided we were ready to hit the big time, but we discovered it is very hard to market one game when you're dealing with Hasbro and Mattel. I didn't know anything about (game marketing), but I knew this game would appeal to kids and I knew kids liked wrestling. I had a very, very brief acquaintance with Verne Gagne back in high school and my first year in college when I wrestled for the USA freestyle team, I had met him. I said I'd call Verne and see if I produce a television commercial and if I air that commercial on his television show—which aired not only in syndication but also on ESPN—if he'd do a 1-800 deal. I'll show him what my profits are and we'll split the profits.

Basically, that's a standard per inquiry type of marketing strategy. I presented that to Verne and his group of people. We pursued it and did it. It

worked relatively well. Through that acquaintance and that relationship, a guy who was working for Verne at the time by the name of Mike Shields who was handling a lot of Verne's day to day business at the time brought me into the business and hired me to do his syndication. That's how it started.

Keller: What was your educational background before getting into sales and marketing?

Bischoff: I grew up in Detroit, lived in Pittsburgh for a while, went to Minnetonka Senior High School (in Minnesota), went to St. Cloud State (Minn.) and the University of Minnesota for a while.

Keller: Have you been a lifelong fan of pro wrestling or did your interest go on and off?

Bischoff: I grew up watching wrestling in Detroit, watching it every Saturday morning, late Saturday morning right before American Bandstand, when Dick the Bruiser, The Sheik, Killer Kowalski, and Bobo Brazil were all prominent names. Then, when I moved to Pittsburgh when I was 13, I switched over to big time wrestling in Pittsburgh. I lived there a couple of years. Then I got hooked on the AWA when I moved to Minnesota when I was about 15.

Keller: What was it about wrestling that caught your eye?

Bischoff: I have no idea. I just always liked it. It's like I still like Westerns. It's just something I've always enjoyed watching. I've always been involved with it at one level or another.

Keller: When you were hired at WCW, what was your job description and did you expect it to be the first step to climbing the WCW corporate ladder?

Bischoff: No. As a matter of fact, I'm not exactly sure what their expectations were at the time. I had heard that I was really hired just to put pressure on Jim Ross and Tony Schiavone and make their lives miserable. I don't know if that's true or not. Basically, I was a C-squad announcer. I came in to bat cleanup on some of the programs, like WCW Pro at the time which was shown in about 40 or 50 markets. Just to do some other C-squad announcing duties.

Keller: You were part time, just flying in?

Bischoff: Yeah, I was flying in, working basically two days a week and then flying back home. I had no expectations or aspirations to do anything other than that. I was perfectly content with that. I have always had a lot of other things going on in my life. I have always had a lot of other projects and things I like to do. That's kind of my hobby, doing deals and making business happen. I was involved in some other television projects at the time. I had the opportunity to be a talent in some other types of television shows. So two days a week was fine with me if that was all

Wade Keller

I was going to be relegated to. I was happy just to get the job.

Keller: What was the path to your current position in WCW?

Bischoff: I don't really know how to answer that other than it became apparent in December of 1992 when I think everybody here realized that the product was suffering in a lot of different ways. This company has always been struggling. That's pretty obvious. But we were struggling even more toward the end of the Bill Watts era. I personally, because I've always been involved in television, saw a lot of things that I felt were just fundamentally wrong with the way we produced television. I had been kind of formulating a plan in my own mind as to what I thought had to be done to bring the television at least up to an acceptable standard. I was prepared to bring that to whomever I had to bring it to, whether it was Jim Ross at the time or Bill Watts had I had that opportunity to say, "Hey guys, you need to fix these things." I didn't know at the time that there was a lot of turmoil with upper management. I didn't really know what the status of their positions were.

In any event, I had kind of prepared more or less an outline of what I thought I would fix if given the opportunity. At about that same time, it was announced that Bill Shaw was going to be looking for an executive producer. Timing was everything. Basically I took the outline I prepared, not knowing if I was ever going to be able to use it and I threw my hat in the ring and became a candidate along with four or five other people.

Keller: What was it do you think that got you that position? Your familiarity with the product and that you had some experience in that area?

Bischoff: I guess you would have to ask Bill Shaw why he chose me. He never really told me. I think, a lot of people don't realize that my experience in wrestling is somewhat limited, but I've done just about everything but put up a wrestling ring and wrestle. Those are the only two things I haven't done. I've done syndication for approximately two years... on a limited basis. I don't want to overstate what I did. But I've done syndication. Also with Verne I've done corporate sponsorship development. In fact, at the time, I put together the largest event sponsorship package with a brewery that had ever been done. I put one together with the G. Heileman Brewing Company from scratch. I got Verne \$100,000 for five events. I put together that. I got involved in production. I put together a home video project with Paramount Motion Pictures with their home video distribution in Canada called Famous Players. I created a best of the '80s type of home video product that essentially took a lot of scratch footage and repackaged it and I sold that to Famous Players

for a pretty huge chunk of money. I've done event promotions. I've promoted throughout Iowa and Minnesota.

So, I haven't done any one thing for a long period of time, but I have had the unique opportunity to do a lot of different things that are a part of the wrestling business. And that combined with my interest and, I guess, experience in the television end of things, perhaps that's one of the things that made me a candidate.

Keller: Did you meet any resistance initially going from an announcer to being executive producer? Did you sense anybody was saying you didn't deserve the spot or were politics not much of an issue at that early stage?

Bischoff: I think politics were an issue, but probably in my mind more than anybody else's. When I went from being a non-player to being one of the players, I had a certain amount of, not just self-doubt, but I was aware of (potential tension). That's a pretty major change. I was concerned because a lot of the people I was now asked to supervise were people who were my friends and peers. When that relationship changes, literally overnight or within the course of two or three weeks, you always worry about what kind of effect it's going to have on people who were your friends and peers previous to that.

But really, there were some minor problems and minor adjustments on everybody's side. I think the biggest problem probably existed in my own mind. I quickly realized there were a whole lot of people in this company who really want to make this work and are very supportive and given the right opportunities will rise to the occasion. That's basically how I approached this thing. I tried to give the people I knew had the talent and the abilities free reign to do the things they felt needed to be done to improve the product. And so far, I think that's worked.

Keller: Was it that cautious approach that helped?

Bischoff: Actually, I don't have a cautious approach and I'm very aggressive. It's just that...

Keller: In dealing with other people?

Bischoff: Yeah. I am fairly aggressive and I deal with things in a pretty aggressive manner and sometimes that's perceived to be negative or over-aggressive, but it's really not. One of the first things that I did was to assure everybody I wasn't here to make a lot of changes. I had to convince people to step up to the plate and grab the bat and swing at the ball, to take some chances, to try to hit homeruns. With as many management changes as have gone on here, there are a lot of people who were afraid, they were afraid to commit, afraid to make statements, afraid to make suggestions because they were afraid of how that was going to be perceived. Anytime you have a lot of management changes over short periods of time, people have a

I think the WWF very successfully targeted teens and pre-teens over the past ten years. It was a real smart strategy. From an advertising point of view in a television industry, that is the most expensive demographic an advertiser has to buy is kids.

tendency to clam up and just try to protect themselves. One of the hardest things I had to do was try to get people to come out of those shells by saying, "Hey, if you think you've got an idea of how to improve the show, come on and step up to the plate and take a swing. The worst thing that is going to happen is it won't work and we'll try something else. You won't get fired for it, you won't get criticized for it, we'll just move on and try something different." It took a little bit of time for people to gain confidence in the fact that they could speak their opinion without being criticized or put down for it.

Keller: Today, do you sense there is a really open dialogue among key employees and perhaps even lower-level employees and wrestlers?

Bischoff: It's getting better. It's certainly not where I'd like to see it. People are still people. It's hard for people to be honest. Sometimes it's hard for people to be honest with themselves. It's hard for people to be honest with each other because people are always afraid of how they're going to be misunderstood or mistaken. Nobody wants to step on anybody else's toes. And all of that creates kind of an inertia, the wrong kind, it creates paralysis. I think things are getting better, but I think we still have some ways to go.

Keller: What is the day to day involvement of Bill Shaw and Bob Dhue in the operations of WCW?

Bischoff: Bill Shaw overseas WCW like he does several other of Turner's companies. He's the vice president of human resources. He overseas the Omni Hotel. He overseas the restaurants. He oversees the Omni arena. He oversees, I believe, the Turner retail chain. And TBS Properties. So he's a very busy guy and he oversees a lot of different things. On a day to day basis he's probably not involved in the little stuff. He oversees it.

I report to Bob Dhue directly. And Bob oversees everything that goes on here at WCW.

Keller: He would be involved in some of the areas you're not involved with, also?

Bischoff: Bob directly oversees marketing,

accounting, syndication. That's the stuff he's involved with on a day to day basis. Bob does get real involved with the day to day activities in television and in talent. He'll get involved when I start spending money. Then he gets involved.

Keller: In the last 12 months, in general, not necessarily what you've had the most influence in, what are the key areas in which you believe WCW has improved?

Bischoff: Obviously, television production has come light years. That's the first one. I think from a purely wrestling point of view, I think things are much more consistent and the level of performance has risen across the boards. Those are the major ones. I think our focus has improved substantially. I think our continuity has improved substantially. Those are the major ones, I guess.

Keller: What are some of the things you specifically wanted to see happen and have made happen in the last year?

Bischoff: There's so many. There's so many little things. All television is is a lot of little details.

Keller: Tell me what some of those are, even if they seem obvious.

Bischoff: Lighting is one. That's a key issue. If you look back to the shows that were airing back in '92 and even previous to that, you look at our TBS program that airs Saturday night. It looked like you were wrestling in somebody's basement. The seats were usually only three-quarters full or half full. The lights had to be dimmed down because of that. The whole thing had a dingy, musty, stale feel to it. The audio was lousy. The packaging, when I talk about packaging, I'm talking about the interviews, the leads, the whole thing was done ala 1970s style. The whole thing looked like a 1970s product. One of the first things I did was try to bring some life back into this thing in a very subtle kind of way by bringing the lights up, by making sure we had people in the arena. By trying to dress the arena as well as we could at that time. I liked the idea of ringside interviews because they gave this thing a kind of spontaneous feel that the show didn't have. Previously they did the interviews on a set where the announcers were and that didn't look natural to me. I wanted to bring the announcers down to the ring where you get the guys right out of a match so they were still breathing hard and sweating and panting and you were kind of experiencing the moment vicariously through them. So those things all kind of livened up the overall feel.

Meanwhile, I was trying to find the money to do the things that we are doing today, and that is new graphics and really dressing the arena up and doing better interview packages and doing a lot of pre-production things to give the show a slicker look.

I can't stand watching Smoky Mountain Wrestling. There's nothing they do that applies to television in the real world in 1994 as far as I'm concerned. If you were to try to syndicate it nationally and try to survive in the television industry with that show, you wouldn't last 15 minutes.

Keller: Let me ask specifically about the graphics packaging. What went into the meetings and the decision to have the futuristic beginning with the robot being made—the Terminator look? What was the philosophy behind introducing that to the beginning of the program?

Bischoff: The genesis of the look for WCW Saturday Night started at Disney. We hired a production designer out of New York and when we decided we were going to go down to Disney, it was important that that show have a really different, kind of a clean, high-tech, unique kind of a look. And when that set design was presented to me, I told them basically, "Here is what I want. I want it to be clean, I want it to be high-tech, I want it to look like the future." If you look closely at the Disney tapings, you'll see a lot of iron work, a lot of that aluminum staging. That was the beginning of it so when we decided, okay, now we're going to come back and retool the TBS program, how do we want it to look? We told the people who were designing our graphics essentially the same thing, that we wanted a high-tech, futuristic industrial kind of a feel. Then they came back with what you see today. We obviously thought it was great and we went with it.

Keller: Was the redesigning of Center Stage planned all along or did that come after the opening package?

Bischoff: That was planned for when I prepared my budgets last June or July. I knew we were going to retool and redesign the inside of Center Stage. I didn't know at that time what it was going to look like, but I knew that it had to be fixed. The timing of the thing... the graphics were actually easier to do than having mats made and that type of thing. It took longer to get the mats, so once we had the graphics package designed, then we knew what the show was going to open and close with, so we decided to address the arena to look consistent with the graphics packages. So that's what we did.

Keller: Is there something behind a robot being made during the introduction? Is there some storyline behind that or is that pretty much just for show and looks? It doesn't seem to necessarily relate to your product to have some robot being created.

Bischoff: I'm trying to make something up as you ask the question, but I can't even make anything up that will make sense there. So, no, it's the overall high-tech futuristic, superhuman type of look that we wanted the show to have.

Keller: You talked about Disney. Is that a connection you created or was that relationship already lingering upon your arrival?

Bischoff: The Disney relationship was one that I created out of necessity. There are a lot of reasons I thought it was important to go to Disney, not the least of which was with as much television as we produce, which is now probably coming close to 400 hours a year, we were burning up a lot of arenas within a 200 or 300 mile radius of Atlanta. We were there so often that it just didn't mean anything anymore. It was tough to draw a crowd. Then we get right back to the problem that I talked about earlier. When you have an arena that's only half full or a quarter full, the only thing that you can do is turn down all the lights. And the production values go right down the toilet when you do that.

The syndicated show, the WorldWide show, has to do a lot of things. One of the things it has to do in order to get play on a television station, and I'm not talking about little regional stations around the country, but if you want to be able to go to Los Angeles or New York and clear your show on a major station, you've got to be able to show a program director or general manager a television show that has a fair amount of production value in it. When you're producing shows in arenas with no people, you can't achieve that. So Disney provided me an opportunity where I could go down there and put shows on and know that I've got fifteen or twenty or twenty-five thousand people a day coming through a relatively small area who would love to see a wrestling show. I knew I would always have a crowd and I knew that I could always control the production values, so I decided it was really important we go to Disney. And not only that, when you say Disney and wrestling in one breath, you get people's attention. I knew that long-term, from a marketing and a strategic point of view, it would position us favorably.

Look at Vince McMahon. I think it was in *Fortune* magazine a couple of years ago. He came out and said he wanted to be the Disney of wrestling. Well, he wished it, I did it. And I think in the next 18 months, you'll really see why I did it. It was more of a strategic move than anything.

Keller: So there might be more to that deal coming up? Or there for sure is?

Bischoff: Yes, there might be more.

Keller: A traditionalist will look at what you're doing at Disney by having the cheer leaders and not having necessarily wrestling fans entering, just casual...

Bischoff: How do you know they're not wrestling fans?

Keller: That's what I was going to say. They're there as tourists. They didn't show up within a certain radius of that arena because there was a wrestling show there necessarily, so they are kind of being filed in as that being an attraction. It's not that they're not wrestling fans, but I doubt person for person, they are as into wrestling as, say, a Macon, Georgia crowd is when that crowd shows up specifically for wrestling and buying tickets for a taping. Is that fair to say?

Bischoff: That's probably true.

Keller: Traditionalists might look at that and the cheerleaders and say it's going too far. Was there any resistance within the office to that?

Bischoff: There was a lot of resistance to Disney within the office, but not for that reason.

Keller: What was the resistance for?

Bischoff: Because it was, I think... going to Disney changed the way we had to do business in almost every aspect. It forced everyone to think long-term, which nobody likes to do. It forced everybody to plan way ahead which nobody likes to do. It forced people to commit to certain things which certain people had problems with. Anytime you do anything differently, there are people who by nature try to resist it. Going to Disney and shooting television for wrestling was certainly quite a bit different than anything anybody had ever experienced. So I think there was just an inherent amount of resistance because it was such a departure from tradition.

Keller: Was one of those departures the idea that people who hadn't won title belts yet were out there doing interviews with belts around their waists?

Bischoff: I'm not sure that hasn't happened before, has it?

Keller: On a very limited basis it has.

Bischoff: That was not one of the objections I remember, to be honest with you.

Keller: The reaction on my end from fans and especially people within the industry was that if word gets out about what happened at the tapings, the results of key pay-per-view matches will be confirmed. People will know what happens due to reports in different media outlets, including newspapers and radio shows. Was that a concern to you?

Bischoff: I'll be honest with you. When you talk about the media, I think what you're really talking about are a very small percentage of papers like your own who report to a very small segment of the overall viewing audience.

Keller: I was more talking about the major newspapers that run wrestling columns, and various radio shows, and to a smaller extent, the trade papers.

Bischoff: Well, those wrestling columns that you talk about have consistently divulged what they've felt would be the outcomes of matches, consistently divulged what they thought was the direction of both WCW and the WWF. They consistently divulge details of negotiations and contracts and things like that. So was I concerned that by going to Disney that they were going to start doing something they weren't already doing? I wasn't.

Keller: This is a small thing that got a lot of negative comments, although I didn't agree with the criticism. People criticized you for hiring models to sit in Center Stage to pep up the appearance of the audience. First of all, is that true, and if so, what was the philosophy behind that?

Bischoff: I don't hire models, number one. That doesn't fall into my area of influence or job responsibilities. So I'm personally not involved in that. There are people who come there every week and I'm sure that we plant some people in there not unlike any other television show, including the NFL, the NBA. I'll continue to do everything I can to enhance the perception of our product to our viewing audience.

Keller: What's your philosophy on what a professional wrestling television show should provide for its audience? It's kind of a simplistic question, but I think there's probably quite a few answers to it.

Bischoff: Yeah, you're right. There are a lot of different answers to it. I think I know some of them, and some of them are escaping me right now. Television is not the same today as it was yesterday and it won't be the same tomorrow as it is today. It changes every single day. It's more competitive now than it ever has been. And wrestling is suffering. There's a lot of other programming. If you look at the new Fox network that's coming out. If you look at ESPN2. If you look at what MTV is doing. If you look at all of the different networks and programs that are out there that are targeting directly at a teen and pre-teen audience, which has traditionally been the stronghold of wrestling, it makes us have to be much more competitive than we've ever been. As far as what wrestling has to provide, certainly it has to provide action, the very basis of good guys and bad guys, strong storylines, and incentive to watch from week to week. You have to wonder what's going to happen next. You need to catch people off guard. You really need to be able to tell a story, not unlike any other form of entertainment, whether it's NBA or NFL—especially the NBA is doing it very, very well with their athletes.

Keller: In what way is the WWF providing a different product or targeting a different type

of fan? In what ways are you consciously different from them?

Bischoff: I think the WWF very successfully targeted teens and pre-teens over the past ten years. If you look at demographically where their strengths have always lied, it's always been with kids and teens. Their product is a living cartoon targeted specifically toward kids. It was a real smart strategy. From an advertising point of view in a television industry, that is the most expensive demographic an advertiser has to buy is kids. Therefore, the most profitable programming you can have is kids programming. That's what McMahon did extremely well.

We have always been, if you look at TBS's demos across the boards, our demos have traditionally been an older demographic, therefore our wrestling has always appealed to an older demographic. We couldn't get away with Doink the Clown. That would really offend our base, our core viewing audience. Whereas McMahon's core viewing audience, that being kids, it works quite well. So I think in a nutshell to answer your question, our product tends to attract an older demographic than McMahon's. I think McMahon recently within the last 12 months or so, or maybe even less, the last 6 months, has really tried to go after our demo. He's probably more like us now than we were a year ago in his approach. He still does skew that younger demo much better.

Keller: What demographic group does WCW target today?

Bischoff: Right now I think we're targeting 18 to 49, men and women.

Keller: What is it in general that you think appeals to that 18-49 group? Is it the storylines more than the characters? The action more than the overall package?

Bischoff: It's all of the above with the emphasis on action and storylines. Kids are going to gravitate toward cartoonish type characters. Adults will skew toward action and storylines.

Keller: How have Bobby Heenan and Gene Okerlund added to WCW's overall package? Were you hoping they would better communicate storylines or did you hope they in and of themselves would draw better television ratings?

Bischoff: Again, all of the above. Basically, Gene Okerlund was "Mean Gene" Okerlund a long time before he went to Vince McMahon. Gene Okerlund was the best stick man in the business a long time before he went to Vince McMahon. Bobby Heenan was Bobby Heenan a long time before he went to Vince McMahon. McMahon had him, he exploited him, he did a terrific job with him, and when the opportunity came up, I did basically the same thing that he did, which was offer them a better deal and utilize their talents here. A lot of people make the mistake of thinking that McMahon created Gene

Okerlund and created Hulk Hogan and created Bobby the Brain. Yet all of those guys were well on their way to being who they were a long time before McMahon started them.

Keller: No doubt about it. What did you want out of both of them?

Bischoff: Basically, why I really wanted Gene was nobody can sell a pay-per-view or an event or conduct an interview better than he does. That was my job here for a long time. I was the pay-per-view pitch guy. I was marginal at best. That's just not my strongsuit. But I was the best we had at it. I knew if we got Gene, nobody could do it better than Gene Okerlund and when he became available, I snatched him.

Keller: And Bobby Heenan?

Bischoff: Bobby Heenan is one of the most entertaining, quick-witted, colorful personalities on the air, period, except for maybe John Madden. In fact, when I listen to Bobby Heenan sometimes I think I'm listening to John Madden. If you close your eyes and just listen, sometimes you wonder. I've always been a fan of Bobby Heenan's, I've watched Bobby Heenan since I was 15 years old. I used to go to the St. Paul Civic Center because I thought he was great. And the same thing, when he became available, I just wasted no time and snatched him.

Keller: It appears in some ways that given the way WCW Main Event has been reformatted that Bobby and Gene are there as the product. In other words, viewers are supposed to tune in to Main Event to see the banter between Okerlund and Heenan where they are the show themselves, rather than simply see them enhance other areas of the product. Is that part of the motivation to set that show apart?

Bischoff: No. I mean, obviously, we're capitalizing on who they are and their unique personalities and the chemistry between the two. That's a part of it. That's certainly not the focus of it.

Keller: How do you perceive your relationship with the wrestlers? Do you think they feel open to come to you and do you believe you're responsive to their concerns?

Bischoff: I guess you'd have to ask them that question. I try to make myself available. I feel I've done a pretty good job responding to most of the things I've been presented with. I'm sure you'll find some people who think I'm the greatest thing that's happened to this company and I'm sure you'll find some people who wish I would fall off the face of the Earth. And the majority of them probably fall somewhere in between.

Keller: Are there any areas in dealing with the wrestlers where you feel you've been especially strong, and as a counter to that, any areas where you feel you've been weaker?

Bischoff: I think my strongest asset is being real above-board with them and not jacking them around just for the sake of doing it and to stroke my own ego. I try to be as honest with them as I can possibly be without offending anybody. I try to be sensible and I listen. I guess if I have a strongsuit, it's that I listen.

Keller: Is one of the harder parts of being in the position you're in is being in a hiring and firing position when it comes to wrestlers and other employees?

Bischoff: It's the hardest part of my job and it's the job I like the least.

Keller: What have you done to approach that part of your job and get better at it or feel more comfortable with it, or is there no way to feel comfortable with that role?

Bischoff: There's never a way to feel comfortable with it because you'll never be able to please everybody you deal with. Sometimes that has negative aspects to it. There are guys I personally like very much, but I'm sure financially I can't give them what in their minds they deserve. There are guys who are not getting the opportunities they deserve, but in the minds of others, they're not ready for it. That's always going to be a problem and the only thing that I can do to try to overcome that is to be as honest as I can be about those situations.

Keller: Who are some of the people who you've learned the most from in the wrestling industry going back to pre-WCW days all the way through to today?

Bischoff: I learned a lot from Verne Gagne. Verne is a controversial guy in a lot of ways. I learned a lot from him. There is probably no one person who I can say I learned a lot from. I'm not a student of any one person. I try to learn from as many different people as I can. One of the things I'm realizing is there's more than one right way to do this thing and you've got to listen to ten different people. If each of those ten different people has ten different answers, and you use ten percent of them, you're probably going to be safe. And I try to use that. There are a lot of people who have a lot of great ideas and I try to learn from as many different people as I can.

I've learned from a lot of mistakes. I've watched people make a lot of mistakes. You can learn from people's successes and you can learn from their mistakes, and I've watched a lot of people make a lot of mistakes. There's a lot of things I know I won't do. But, other than the initial experience I got from Verne, there is really no one person. I learn something new every day. I'll learn something new before the day ends today.

Keller: Did you learn a lot from seeing first-hand Bill Watts in the position somewhat similar to the position you're in now?

Bischoff: No. Not to sound arrogant, but I

knew that his approach wouldn't work for me from day one. I didn't learn anything at all. I already knew that.

Keller: How much have you studied and watched and tried to pick up on different things being done by the WWF and to a different extent, Smoky Mountain Wrestling or ECW?

Bischoff: I can't stand watching Smoky Mountain Wrestling. I think it's the amateur hour. There's nothing they do that applies to television in the real world in 1994 as far as I'm concerned. That show plays really well in the little corner of the country that it lives in, but if you were to try to take that show and syndicate it nationally and try to survive in the television industry with that show, you wouldn't last 15 minutes.

Keller: On the storyline end, do you see any value?

Bischoff: No, they're not going to teach us anything. I'm sure that experience that exists here in Ric Flair, Greg Gagne, Mike Graham, Bill Dundee, Robert Fuller, and all of the other people who come to the table with ideas eclipses anything that goes on in Smoky Mountain. They're a small time, amateur organization that's doing really well in their little corner of the universe.

Keller: How about ECW?

Bischoff: I've watched one or two of their things and I think that they have a product that appeals to a real hardcore audience and that's what they want. I can't do what they do. When you're trying to appeal to a mass audience, you can't target that specific of an audience. To go out and get ratings that will make you competitive nationally and internationally, you can't target that small of an audience, which is basically what (Jim) Cornette does as well. He targets this small, real hardcore audience which is fine for his business plan. Like I said he wouldn't last five minutes out on the street with it.

Keller: We critique you all the time. If you want, take a few seconds given your knowledge, to critique the wrestling press, be it the *Torch*, the *Observer*, radio shows you might hear, newspaper columns. In what areas do they frustrate you and in what areas do you think they serve a legitimate purpose? Be honest. Take shots.

Bischoff: Oh boy. I have a real hard time with people who report opinion as fact or report hearsay as fact and that has historically been the foundation of the wrestling press. I think as of late, particularly with your magazine lately the ones that I've seen, you have kind of evolved into a more legitimate form of a press in that you report opinion as opinion rather than reporting opinion as fact. However, a lot of times your facts are based on hearsay and rumors and third and fourth hand information that's totally inaccurate.

I've read some of the figures you've thrown out in terms of buyrates that I know are totally inaccurate. I've read the information that you've put down in terms of people's salaries that I know are totally inaccurate. Up until a few months ago, you were reporting people's positions in this company that were totally inaccurate. You, even on a personal basis, had assigned me responsibility for the infamous boat blow-up scene which I had absolutely nothing to do with and was dead set against.

So you report a lot of things as fact that are not fact, and therefore mislead the people who read your magazine who believe you know what you're talking about. In some cases you do, but in many cases you don't. I think that if you applied the same standards of consistency and accuracy to what you do as to what you expect us to do, you would have a real hard time with your own product. You guys can't spell half the time, your sentence structure makes my third grade English teacher cringe. So, from a journalistic point of view, the same quality standards that you guys all try to apply to us when you critique us you don't even apply to your own product. That makes me laugh every once in a while.

Overall, I think they're evolving into something that's a little bit more legitimate. As far as what function they serve, I think they keep a very small segment of society which is made up of people obsessed with professional wrestling entertained, interested, up to date, and I guess if that's important, then I guess you probably fulfill those goals.

Keller: Nothing else?

Bischoff: Give me a second (laughs). I can't think of anything else. Well, actually, the big thing for me is reporting opinion as fact. I see that so much. I think at some point you're going to have to grow up and become legitimate. I think you—when I say you, I mean the *Torch*—is probably getting more and more in that direction.

Keller: In terms of radio shows or newspaper columns, does any of that cross your desk a lot? Is it a concern to you or is it not significant enough for you to be concerned?

Bischoff: I don't worry about the press. I really don't. In fact, I used to say when you guys were burying me a lot I kind of liked it. I would get kind of nervous if you guys would start saying good things about me. I would figure I was doing something wrong. So keep writing that bad stuff. I like it. I like proving people wrong. It's one of my favorite things in life.

Keller: If it helps the wrestling business, I like being proven wrong, too. Any questions I didn't ask that you would like to answer?

Bischoff: No. I didn't come with an agenda. I was not really sure whether I wanted to do this interview because philosophically I've had a really hard time with what you guys do. It seems

like you always try to, in general, tear down this thing that you've purported to love so much. But, like I said, the stuff the last couple of months I've been reading has been a more legitimate type of press.

Keller: Without getting into specifics, there has been some resentment by some wrestlers concerning the big money that's being spent on announcers, whatever that is perceived to be. Is that unfair to characterize announcers as overpaid or as a result, wrestlers as underpaid? Are you happy with the pay structure?

Bischoff: No, I'm not happy with the pay structure because it's too high all the way across the board, but a lot of what wrestlers believe is perpetuated by what you guys report. And I've read some of the numbers that you guys have reported that are so far off it's laughable, so as far as the wrestlers thinking the announcers are overpaid, they probably do (think so) based on what you guys report. Based on reality, no they're not (overpaid). For instance, take a guy like Gene Okerlund, he is busting his rear end five days a week. He probably puts in as many hours as most of the guys that are on the road do in two weeks. The guy works like a dog. And, hey, it takes a unique talents to be a wrestler, an extremely unique talent, it takes unique athletic abilities. But it takes an equally unique talent to become an excellent wrestling announcer. Wrestling announcing is a very subtle art form and a lot of people think they can do it that really can't. The difference between an average announcer and an excellent announcer is night and day, and it's worth a lot of money.

Keller: What are the most important measuring sticks of success when the corporate heads look at WCW? Is it TV ratings, pay-per-view buyrates, house show attendance, merchandising? Is one stressed more than another?

Bischoff: Again, it's all of the above, but the real answer is the bottom line. Because those are all little avenues to the bottom line. They all have to function well. This company, being a television company, has the majority of its revenue base coming from television and then from pay-per-views—the two are almost equal at this point—so that's obviously where the emphasis is. At the same time, merchandising certainly has to improve and carry its load and licensing has to carry its load and arenas have to carry their load. Those are all opportunities that we can really expand on because we haven't scratched the surface on marketing. We haven't scratched the surface on merchandising and licensing. We haven't scratched the surface, in fact we've been losing money by the train-car full in arenas. Those are all very, very important revenue streams that are all being emphasized and looked at.

But the bottom line here is the first thing that

has to work is television. This is a television company. If the ratings don't work, nothing else is working. If people aren't watching, they won't come to the arenas. If people aren't watching, they won't buy the pay-per-views. If people don't care about the product, they're not going to buy the merchandise. Basically, it all stems from the success or failure of the television show.

Keller: How long does it take, given your knowledge of television, for improvements in a television product to translate into television ratings? Should it be pretty instantaneous or does it take some time for momentum to build?

Bischoff: We've lost a lot of audience. One of the things people don't realize, because I often times have people compare us to Raw, which I think is pretty stupid, it's not apples to apples. Raw is prime time, coast to coast, on a Monday night. WCW Saturday Night airs at 6 o'clock Eastern, 5 o'clock Central, 3 o'clock on the Pacific. Ratings and shares are relative to the households using television. You can't get a high rating if the HUT (homes using televisions) levels are down. In other words, if nobody's home, nobody's watching. Well, the Saturday night show that airs at 6 o'clock Eastern gets lost west of the Mississippi, it doesn't exist Saturday afternoon. So for us to get a 2.5 or a 2.8 with the HUT levels we have, I would like to see what would happen to Monday Night Raw if they had to air at 6 o'clock Eastern and 3 o'clock Pacific time and then compare ratings.

Keller: How much of a differential do you believe that translates to in a rating? Is your 2.5 equal to a 2.8 of theirs?

Bischoff: I've been asking that same question from our research people for a month now and hopefully I'll get an answer. They're working on it. It's a formula, but obviously it's a big difference, a huge difference. Prime time coast to coast is a lot different than 6 o'clock Eastern and 3 o'clock Pacific.

Keller: One of the reasons people do make that comparison between WCW Saturday Night and Monday Night Raw is that WCW has been ahead of what was at the time WWF Prime Time Wrestling even though there was that differential. So, if you compare how ratings were in the past to how they are now, it's not exactly apples to apples, but it's not exactly absurd either. If WCW is only slightly behind Raw, it's a good point you brought up, but in the past WCW despite that margin has beat the WWF's Monday night show. Maybe that's why that comparison is made, since you don't go head to head with them at any time.

Bischoff: Well, a lot of the dynamics of television have changed and the dynamics of TBS have changed and certainly the dynamics and success of USA in general have changed and sometimes programming goes along with it.

In terms of how long it takes to see changes on

a TV show appear in the ratings, I think it takes a year. You have to really build. I think... I know our product is better than the WWF on every level. There is no question in my mind that we are better than they are. And when I travel, when we go overseas, when I talk to people who are objective who don't think they know a lot about the wrestling business, who just compare the two products, they tell me hand over fist ours is substantially better than theirs. They took the WWF off in Sweden and put WCW on, partly because of Frank Anderson, but also in a large part because our production values are better than theirs. Their production values have gone down hill while our production values have gone up hill. But, it's gonna take a year because the general public doesn't know it. If they're not already watching the product, you've got to go out and knock on their doors. We've created the product, now we've got to go out and knock on the door and sell it. I invite people to compare the two shows.

Keller: I don't ask this as a loaded question, but you don't think there's even one area where the WWF is stronger than you in terms of what a viewer would perceive?

Bischoff: Sure, there's a number of things they do a lot better than we do. But in general, our product is better than theirs, our wrestling is better than theirs, I know the storylines that we're laying out are better than theirs, I know our characters are better than theirs. From a production value point of view, I still look at a couple of things they do and wish I could do them. But, they've got three edit suites. I've got one. They've probably got four personnel to my one in terms of production. And I produce more television than they do. So I'm doing a whole lot more with a whole lot less and I feel overall, I'm providing a better product.

Keller: What's the one thing about this job that surprised you the most?

Bischoff: I can't think of anything.

Keller: Did you know what to expect, then?

Bischoff: Yeah, I knew what to expect. I've been around it long enough and I've been around this company long enough. I knew a lot of the things that were wrong. When you worked in the environment that I worked in, you see all the things that are wrong and you knew all the things that had to be fixed. I was well aware of how hard the job was going to be. That certainly didn't shock me. I was well aware of the fact that wrestling in general is suffering because of the success of other programming and because it's been out there and overexposed for a long, long time. So, no, it wasn't like I went into it with my eyes closed. I was prepared for it. I knew what I was up against. I'm surprised I'm putting in as many hours as I am. I wish things would happen faster than they happen.

Keller: What is an element of the TBS structure that hinders things from happening quickly—maybe for good reasons—but what's part of the structure that people on the outside may not know about?

Bischoff: Any time you're in a company as big as Turner Broadcasting, nothing happens immediately. I have a lot of friends who work at Universal/MCA, I know a lot of people at Paramount, I've got friends who work at Disney both in Los Angeles and Orlando, and they're faced with the same problems I'm faced with. When you're involved with a major company, nothing happens fast. This is a publicly held company. There's all kinds of different corporate structures that have to be dealt with simultaneously in order to make things happen, and that just takes time. If this was a one-man show, it would be a lot easier in some ways. We probably wouldn't be here (i.e. in business), but it would be a lot easier. You know, when you work for a company like Turner, there's a lot of positive things about it and there're a lot of things you wish you could overcome more easily. But, you know, you play the hand you're dealt. I would much rather be here than working in a one-man shop somewhere.

Keller: What's a typical work week like for you?

Bischoff: Oh my god. They all run together. I have a production meeting every morning at 9:30 am. I have a minimum of one, sometimes two television tapings every week I have to be involved in. I'm constantly negotiating contracts. I'm constantly looking for new business opportunities, trying to mend old fences that have been broken in the past and trying to create new relationships that have never existed before.

Keller: How many hours a week are you putting in now?

Bischoff: Probably a minimum of 70.

Keller: Does that include a lot of travel, or is that mainly office work?

Bischoff: I'm probably doing more travel than I thought I would be doing, certainly a lot more than I like to do. A fair amount of travel.

Keller: A lot of long time fans in this country, not to mention long time promoters, don't look at the overseas situation like you do in terms of its potential. How much potential do the international markets have for WCW to be a big chunk of revenue? And how big is that chunk?

Bischoff: Again, a couple different questions there. The first question is why is it different than it is over here? There is a huge potential over there and the reason is wrestling hasn't been overexposed there. If you look at what we've done and look at what the WWF has done and what everybody else has done, the smaller promotions and things like that... Here in

As far as what function they (wrestling newsletters) serve, I think they keep a very small segment of society which is made up of people obsessed with professional wrestling entertained, interested, up to date, and I guess if that's important, then I guess you probably fulfill those goals.

Atlanta, without sitting down and thinking about it for more than two minutes, there're probably 10 or 12 hours a week of wrestling available here each and every week and I'm sure most major markets are like that. The WWF has burned up arenas all over the country. We've burned up arenas all over the country. We've overexposed the television product here domestically. And those conditions don't exist overseas.

The other dynamic that plays in is that in Europe in particular, a lot of the countries like Germany have only had private television for a few years. Up until just a few years ago, it was all public or government controlled television. They haven't commercialized television to the extent that we have here. There're not as many options. There aren't 57 channels with nothing on overseas. There are only three or four television stations in a lot of markets. So there's a unique opportunity to expose your product to a huge population of people who haven't seen it before. Europe today is much like the United States was 10 years ago in terms of it being a potential market for this product because it hasn't been burned up yet, although some people are trying.

Keller: Could the revenue generated overseas become the majority?

Bischoff: I think it could be.

Keller: Do you look at that as a distinct possibility or is that pretty far-fetched?

Bischoff: I think it's a distinct possibility.

Keller: Would you personally like to remain in the professional wrestling industry for five or ten more years if you reach a certain level of consistent success, or would you like to move on to other areas somewhere along the line?

Bischoff: Most of the things I've done in my life, I've stuck with for quite a long time. I worked for Verne for six years. Before that the company I worked for I was with for probably eight years or nine years. I hope I'm in this position five or ten years from now.

END NOTES

Chris Adams...

I don't remember how exactly I got hooked up with Chris Adams. I would guess I got his phone number from someone and thought he would be an interesting interview. Being the interview took place in 1990 it was one of the early interviews I did and therefore had the characteristics of the earlier "Torch Talks."

Adams came across as genuine, but not fascinating. Since Adams particularly didn't know who I was at the time and thus wasn't as comfortable as some other "Torch Talk" subjects were as years went on, he seemed hesitant to be critical of others. For instance, in what had to be an episode of brown nosing, he called Hulk Hogan "the ultimate wrestler if there ever was one."

What interested me most about interviewing Adams was finding out why he tended to stay in and around Dallas, rarely venturing beyond for a long stretch of time. He was a good wrestler with a good appearance and name recognition from his years on national television during the heyday of World Class Championship Wrestling. Except for his stay in the UWF, he was never a mainstay in another national promotion.

His own promotion that he talked about during the interview never took off. He promoted independent shows for a while but they never went beyond the scope of the dozens of independent groups you read about every week in the "Independent Highlights" results section in the weekly *Torches*. He still wrestles in Dallas part time and his greatest impact on the sport today is that he trained Steve Austin.

James Beard...

I always liked "Torch Talks" that veered away from the popular, current event oriented, controversial, high-profile subject. Referees have traditionally received so little attention in wrestling. They get mentioned when they take bumps, but otherwise, because most are good at what they do, we rarely notice them.

I've thought for a while that one small detail that could make wrestling a little better would be to put more focus on referees, not in terms of Bill Alfonso heel-ref type angles, but to put power back in their hands. Wrestlers themselves don't show enough respect to the referees, not consciously, but just out of habit. How often do you see a referee count to five in the process of threatening to disqualify a wrestler for failing to break a hold, yet not disqualify the wrestler when he reaches five? With wrestling being a work, if wrestlers paid more reverence to the referee, it would add some realism to the matches because it would make it seem as if the match's outcome was not a foregone conclusion and that wrestlers really feared being disqualified.

I believe Beard was very honest in his interview. He didn't seem to be playing political games but had an obvious love for the business and his role in the business. It seemed he also liked the attention the "Torch Talk" gave him, not for his personal gratification as much as for the attention that the often ignored referees got in the process.

James Beard is still referring based out of Dallas (I think), although he has not gotten a big break with a national promotion.

Eric Bischoff...

Eric Bischoff and I knew each other in our more formative stages, so to speak. He was an entry level announcer on the bottom of the totem pole in the AWA hierarchy when I first met him. I, at the time, was just starting to gain recognition as editor of the *Torch*. We actually shared more in common than we realized until this interview took place. We both had common friends at a local chain of karate schools and had both trained with some of the same instructors.

That said, we haven't been the best of friends either. During Bischoff's AWA days we were guests on a Twin Cities radio show with the *Wrestling Observer's* Dave Meltzer via telephone and Greg Gagne in studio.

Bischoff was still a low-level office worker and TV announcer at the time. We exchanged some polite, but tense on-air blows because Eric always seemed to have a skepticism for what I did with the *Torch*, be it the editorial policy, editorial viewpoints, or the accuracy—not a surprise considering his roots were with the Gagnes.

When he rose to power in WCW, I was eager to interview him. I was as surprised as everyone else that he went from an entry level, admittedly mediocre announcer with WCW (brought in by Greg Gagne, whom he would later lay off) to being the vice president. When the interview took place in April of 1994, he had really made a mark in WCW.

Bischoff wasn't and still isn't respected to this day by many in the industry because he doesn't seem to be a "wrestling person" in the sense that, among other things, he hasn't openly shown great knowledge of the history of wrestling, shown a desire to learn from other cultures and other styles of wrestling, and hasn't displayed basic aptitude for the names of wrestling holds which as an announcer should be a top priority. He seemed more concerned with climbing the corporate ladder, gaining recognition and corporate promotions, and scoring points in the TV ratings game.

In the interview, that came across. He was criticized by many in the industry after the interview was published, one guffaw being that he bragged about the high-tech opening to WCW Saturday Night that he oversaw the creation of, yet had no idea what the opening sequence of robots symbolized. He was refreshingly frank and open in admitting there was no connection between the wrestling and the opening theme, but nonetheless, it became a sort of symbol for his surface level polish but seeming lack of depth in many areas of his job descriptions, both as an executive and an announcer.

As motivated as Bischoff came across in the interview, there was a sense of flippancy and condescension that hit home, for instance, when he rather cavalierly (although without apparent malice) belittled the *Torch* and the niche market it served as if it was beneath him, in his position, to be talking to such a publication.

Where he showed a lack of depth in the interview—maybe to not tip his hand to the competition, maybe because he didn't have a better answer—was when talking about where WCW could improve as compared to the WWF. He didn't reveal any sense of having grand ideas for change. He talked about WCW's character development being stronger than the WWF's, yet that was considered one of WCW's weakest areas at the time. He complimented WCW's storylines, yet the WWF was so far and above theirs, it wasn't even considered an issue. So he was either unaware of the difference through lack of knowledge (either through inability to recognize the difference or just not studying the WWF and thus not realizing why the WWF was stronger) or was lying to cover his position.

My criticism notwithstanding (and his condescension notwithstanding) I applaud Bischoff for having the self-confidence, if not courtesy, to take part in the "Torch Talk" forum and to subject himself to scrutinizing questions and post-interview criticism. Vince McMahon, despite several requests over the years, has yet to accept several invitations. He agreed to be interviewed once in person, but then didn't return calls afterward.

Today Bischoff continues to run WCW with as much power as ever. This interview shows the foundation of an Eric Bischoff who today wants to drive Vince McMahon out of business or at least to a distant second in the promoting game. That competitive Darwinian drive, not usually a fashionable trait within the historically oligopolistic industry, has caused him to be a fun leader to write about. Past WCW V.P.s—the buffoonish Jim Herd, the sincere yet underqualified ham Kip Frey, and the strong-fisted and domineering Bill Watts—have all been interesting to write about over the years, but none showed the competency to actually bring WCW into the same league as the WWF. Bischoff has accomplished that and, therefore, if for no other reason, he has become a significant player in wrestling's history book.

LARRY CAMERON

"Lethal" Larry Cameron, at age 37, has become one of the hottest new properties in wrestling. He began wrestling for the Minneapolis-based PWA just three years ago after training with Eddie Sharkey. He spent the last year in Calgary and has recently returned to Minneapolis. Nineteen-eighty-nine was Cameron's first year wrestling full-time and he finished in third place in the Torch 1989 Rookie of the Year balloting. "Lethal" Larry, also known as "Larry the Butcher" due to his former job and his in-ring tactics, recently was given a tryout by the NWA. The following is a "Torch Talk" with Cameron conducted by Wade Keller on Apr. 27, 1989.

Wade Keller: Was your recent tryout in Atlanta for the NWA successful?

Larry Cameron: Well, I worked as a babyface down there which is something I hadn't done much of. I think it went fairly well. I didn't have my particular stompin' and kickin' match because I wanted to show something more than kicking and stomping. So, doing it that way, it wasn't as hot from start to end, but the crowd got into it.

Keller: Do you think you have a future in the NWA?



Larry Cameron

Wade Keller

Cameron: When I got into this business, I decided not to sit around and wish. When I do something, I do the best I can at that particular time. If things happen to work out, then they work out. I'm not in it just to be a wrestler. I'm approaching it strictly as a business.

Keller: You were a competitive bodybuilder before becoming a wrestler. Why did you change directions?

Cameron: In 1985, right after I won Mr. Minnesota, I came to the conclusion I wasn't going to make no money bodybuilding. There are so many good bodybuilders out there and I came to the conclusion that I could do better chasin' Hulk Hogan than Lee Haney.

Keller: Do you have aspirations to eventually go to the WWF?

Cameron: Like I said, all I can do is go work hard. As long as I'm still enjoying it and feel I'm learning, I mean, I've only scratched the surface of it. Then it doesn't matter where I am. And things just seem to happen. I figure once you get good enough, they'll let you know it. If you can never make it to that level, then why worry.

Keller: Throughout your career, who have you liked to wrestle the most and who the least?

Cameron: Either Owen Hart or Davey Boy Smith. The least, probably Strangler DiSalvo. He's so big, there's only so much you can do with him.

Keller: Is Owen Hart as good as many say he is?

Cameron: Yeah, he is. He is legitimately good. He's not only good, but he's tough, you know what I mean? He's a tough kid. He can take some pounding. The only thing he might be lacking compared to Ultimate Warrior and Hulk Hogan is maybe his size. But as far as his wrestling ability, I think he's one of the greatest workers out there.

Keller: How did you like working for the AWA?

Cameron: I liked it. I learned a lot when I worked for those guys. Anytime I get in the ring, I'm pretty much like a sponge so I can get as much knowledge of the game as I can. It was a different style, so knowing that you are going to be faced with many different types of wrestlers is good. I learned something.

Keller: What promotions have you worked for since you began professional wrestling?

Cameron: The PWA, Calgary, Windy City, the IWA, AWA, some independent shots. It's all been fun.

Keller: How was the adjustment from a part-time promotion like the PWA to a full-time circuit like Calgary?

Cameron: I really loved Calgary. Like I said,

when I get into something, I really try to master what I'm doin'. I figured the only way I was going to learn was to do it over and over and over again. I got to see a lot of Canada and I've been a lot of places that probably a lot of Canadian people haven't been. It was kind of like a paid vacation for me.

Keller: Was it tough being on the road days on end?

Cameron: You don't look at it as rough. You find things to do to occupy your time. Being with a bunch of good guys makes the rides a little bit easier even when things got tough. But we have stories.

Keller: What is one of the better stories?

Cameron: If you ever hear anyone from Calgary talk about Yellow Knife, well, it was one of those trips that would stick out in my mind. As we took off, we took off in two vans. Everybody was pretty comfortable. We were up in Yellow Knife in the Northwest Territory and it was June 26, probably one of the longest days of summer, so it was daylight for probably 24 hours. One of the vans broke, so we ended up riding 13 guys in a van that was supposed to hold, maybe nine people. Then we had the oil and stuff checked and the gas station attendant didn't fasten down the hood tight enough so when we got drivin', the hood flew up and blew up the windshield. We must've been drivin' for three or four days without a windshield with bugs and stuff comin' in. Then we ran out of gas—twice (laughs). Then we finally made it to the show about 11:30 that night, so we were a little late. But, surprisingly most of the people were still there.

Keller: What was the longest road trip you were on in Calgary?

Cameron: It was really common to be on the road from Monday to Friday morning. For a while we went four or five weeks in a row without a day off; we were working Sundays, too. I think that was another time it was pretty intense, but after a while, you get used to it, you know.

Keller: Did you ever have any run-ins with any of the veterans in Calgary?

Cameron: No, I can't say that I had a run-in with them. A lot of new guys have a habit of causin' heat among themselves. Usually (it can be avoided) by just keepin' your mouth closed and sittin' and listening once in a while, but a lot of time when guys tend to get themselves in that position with veterans who have been around a while, it's irritating, but I had no problems.

Keller: Why did you return to Minneapolis?

Cameron: For one thing, the territory shut down. I was doing independent shots up there and was waiting for my Japan trip.

Keller: How was your Japan tour?



Cameron vs. Shane Douglas

Wade Keller

Cameron: Great. I worked for New Japan. Bam Bam Bigelow, Scott Hall, Nord the Barbarian, Corporal Kirschner, and Mean Mark (a/k/a Undertaker) were all there. We had a pretty good trip. In Japan, when you get over there, you learn you only have one or two responsibilities. It's to catch the bus on time and to work hard in the ring. Once you look for more to do than that, you can get bored and maybe frustrated real quick. It's a place where time slows down. There aren't a lot of gyms, so the guys are a little more intense. Plus, you can't get the right food. But with the working and the pay and the way they treat you, it's got to be one of the finest organizations to work for.

Keller: Who did you work against in Japan?

Cameron: (Masa) Saito, (Koji) Kitao, Riki (Choshu). Pretty much every night I was working with the best wrestlers over there. I worked a lot of tags, too.

Keller: Who do you like working with the most?

Cameron: It's hard to say because they all do stuff different from one another. I think probably Riki and Saito because it's a little bit more American style. You might even be able to call a spot there. It didn't matter which one you worked with because it was going to be the same, hard and stiff.

Keller: How do you communicate without a common language?

Cameron: You just sort of position yourself. Working, it's almost like dancing. Like boxing, or whatever, you counter.

END NOTES

Larry Cameron

Larry didn't prove to be the most talkative interview subject of all time. His quiet nature behind the scenes maybe made some people think there wasn't a lot going on upstairs with Larry, but I had the chance to get to know him pretty well and knew differently. Larry was very introspective and non-confrontational and non-political. That, in some ways, slowed down his career progress. He was humble and didn't push for himself to get a break in the business. He never did get a major push in either the WWF or WCW. He was considered an adequate worker in the ring whose strengths were his appearance and ring presence.

He spent the few years after this interview earning his primary income from wrestling in Europe, where he ended up forming a family. His mark on the industry over the long run, unfortunately and tragically, will be that of one of few wrestlers to die in the ring. It was of an apparent heart attack in 1993, some have suggested maybe partially due to years of steroid use. He was a big star in Europe and seemed to have carved out a niche for himself. Many didn't realize because he appeared to be young and hadn't been in wrestling all that long that he was actually in his late 30s during his peak years in Europe. His death particularly saddened those who knew him in Minnesota, including PWA promoter Eddie Sharkey who helped train Larry, helping lead him from his job as a butcher in Minneapolis to a full-time star in Europe in a short number of years.

My favorite personal memories of Larry came while taking a road trip between Minneapolis and Chicago with him, Sharkey, and early columnist for the *Torch*, Brad Breitzman. At one point we were driving down Hallstad Street, one of the rougher streets in Chicago—the one One Man Gang claimed to hail from. Under normal circumstances I would have feared for my life. However, rather than roll the windows up, lock the doors, and look straight ahead hoping nobody saw us, I smiled as Larry rolled down his passenger side front window and rested his arm out of the window, flexing his biceps in the process. No one bothered us and we all had a good laugh. (I still locked the doors, though.)

Dennis Coraluzzo

The Dennis Coraluzzo interview originally was published in a monthly supplement to the *Torch* called "Ring Post" that was around for about a year. Dennis was beginning to make a name for himself around the time of this interview. He was the first promoter to really take notice of Sabu and since the interview he has joined the NWA and has been behind a push to restore some credibility and name recognition to the historical NWA initials. He continues to promote independent cards in the New Jersey area and is one of the most active members of the small NWA board.

Jim Cornette

There are two of Jim Cornette's "Torch Talk"s from the past republished in this book. They were the second and third interviews I conducted with him. The first interview was published in the 1990 *Torch Yearbook* (with the exception of two excerpts in issues 98 and 100 of the *Torch*). The first interview (which some day will be republished whenever I republish the old yearbook it appeared in) focused on his beginnings in wrestling from being brought to wrestling matches as a kid to becoming a photographer to becoming a manager to his peak years as a manager during the heyday of Crockett promotions. He also talked about why he left the NWA and told horror stories from the end of his stay with Jim Crockett Promotions. He also threw in some Von Erich stories from his days in World Class Championship Wrestling.

These second and third interviews act as bookends in a sense in that they came at two key times in Cornette's second career in wrestling, that of a promoter. The first interview was a version of Cornette that was full of idealism and vigor, almost an innocence and purity. He was excited about his plans to build a company called Smoky Mountain Wrestling. He talked with pride about how SMW would be different from what wrestling had become, how it wouldn't be like the WWF or the latter days of Jim Crockett Promotions. He truly believed that there was a sustainable market for "wrestling the way it used to be and the way you like it."

The second interview in this collection, conducted more than a year later was with a different Jim Cornette. He had been introduced to the realities of entrepreneurship, the realities of how the outlook of fans had changed maybe more than he realized, the struggles of dealing with meeting payrolls and dealing with wrestlers who didn't share his ideals and work ethic. He also had been introduced to compromise.

The third interview was prompted after Cornette shocked the wrestling industry by showing up on WWF television. A year earlier he had explained why associating with the WWF would hurt SMW. In this interview, he explained why compromise was necessary. This was the last "Torch Talk" conducted with Cornette. You can tell in this interview signs of tension between Cornette and me. Those tensions grew over the next year or so as the *Torch's* coverage, justifiably so in my opinion, grew more critical of Cornette's promoting practices. He vehemently disagreed with the tone and content of the *Torch's* coverage and made that very clear in threatening phone calls which have since put a probably permanent cap on our professional association with each other.

That said, these interviews remain two of the top five or ten "Torch Talks" of all time thanks to Cornette's wit, strong opinions, and oratory skills. There is a lot to learn from these two very contrasting Jim Cornette interviews.

DENNIS CORALUZZO

WWA promoter Dennis Coraluzzo is a husband of 20 years and a father of three who has worked in insurance since 1973. In the mid-'80s after doing some photography, Coraluzzo got involved in promoting. Last month, he was accepted as a member of the National Wrestling Alliance and plans to expand his promoting base. The interview was conducted in December 1992.

Wade Keller: Do you remember the first time you realized pro wrestling existed?

Dennis Coraluzzo: Yeah. I was probably 6 or 7 years old. We used to get the old WWWF wrestling. I believe back then the TV announcer was a guy by the name of Ray Morgan. I liked it a lot. When I was younger, we only had three channels, ABC, CBS, and NBC. Then they came out with UHF antennas and every Sunday we used to pick up wrestling from the Chase. I remember Terry Funk when he was a really young kid. He and his brother and his father, Dory Sr.

Keller: How long did you plan to be involved in wrestling before you actually got involved?

Coraluzzo: My brother and I used to always talk about becoming professional wrestlers and a tag team when we were kids. We were big Bruno Sammartino fans. He was the big guy around here. We just loved the WWWF back then. Some of the greatest wrestlers of all time we saw right



Dennis Coraluzzo

Wade Keller

in our living room. We saw them live, too. Bob Brazil, The Kangaroos, Killer Kowalski, Sammartino, Hans Mortier, Gorilla Monsoon, and Rogers. Every live show in the area we used to attend.

Keller: What was your first experience as part of the business behind-the-scenes?

Coraluzzo: The WWWF used to do a lot of spot shows in the area. They used to do it for charities at local high schools. A friend of mine and his dad were involved in promoting the spot shows. They had done three or four or five of them. I helped them set the shows up through the promotion end of it, selling tickets. The WWWF had TV and they would do local interviews and plug shows locally. If I remember right, they struck a deal with the Spectrum arena and they were not allowed to promote within a 25 or 50 mile radius of the spectrum, so they cut out all of the small stuff. Then the NWA came to town. It was Mid-Atlantic, Crockett, around 1984 when Crockett first started expanding. I was at the Civic Center for the very first show. I was just shooting pictures on my own with a zoom lens. I was a really lousy photographer. I would take like 60 pictures and get two really good ones the people from the magazines liked to have. So I was standing on the stage with a friend of mine and this disc jockey from a local radio station came out. He was all upset and he told me they brought in thousands of dollars worth of equipment to do interviews with all the wrestlers and they were doing a big promotion, but no one had the sense to bring a 35mm camera with them. So he asked me, "Do you want to shoot pictures?" I said I'd do it on one condition, make sure I could do it every month. He took care of that and after that I began hanging out backstage, talking to people and meeting people. It made me want to get into the promoting end of it.

Keller: What prompted you to actually get into promoting.

Coraluzzo: I remember talking to Elliot Murnick at the time, he was the local site coordinator. He and Jim Crockett Jr. worked together and back then they thought they were the hottest thing to come down the pike. So I talked to them about doing some stuff in Jersey. Murnick laughed in my face. It was funny because later they agreed to do two spot shows in South Jersey in a town called Mt. Holly. A friend of mine was in charge of setting everything up for the charity. I helped him out as a friend because I wanted the charity to do well and make a lot of money. They were the two most successful shows they drew outside of the Civic Center. One drew 2,200 and the other drew 1,800 at the same school maybe a month later. I helped him promote that and it got my juices flowing.

Keller: Who were some of your early influences in learning how to be a promoter?

Coraluzzo: Because I wanted to promote on my own, just from doing the photography I got

really educated. The most influential person I met back there, the most helpful, was Jim Cornette. When he first came into town with Condrey and Eaton. Then I hooked up with Larry Sharpe. Larry, too, has been very helpful to me.

Keller: What is the best time you've had in wrestling?

Coraluzzo: This is funny, because it was a tour put on by Joe Goodhart called "Tennessee Tour." I flew down there and hooked up with the people down there and it was probably the most fun time I had in professional wrestling. It was just four or five days of straight partying with the wrestlers and the fans. It might sound boring to some people, but it was great. Right up there is being able to put together The Midnight Express vs. Cactus Jack & Terry Funk at the Tom Robinson benefit. It sounds crazy, but that was probably the most exciting thing for me in wrestling. Meeting Jim Cornette was another one. Doing things in wrestling with my sons. My youngest son Mark at 11 is probably one of the youngest ring announcers in the business.

Keller: What is the most disappointing thing to happen to you in wrestling?

Coraluzzo: At one time I was good friends with Joel Goodhart. It was disappointing to have to compete with him. Back years ago he was a good guy and I used to have a lot of fun with him. I don't know what happened with him. That is probably the darkest part of promoting that I've been involved with.

Keller: What is the worst aspect of the wrestling business in general?

Coraluzzo: The blackest part about the business is that you can count on one hand the people you can trust. It's even that way in the insurance business. I have a weakness that I trust too many people and I'm often disappointed.

Keller: What is the best part?

Coraluzzo: Seeing people in the seats when you've worked hard to bring them a show they want to see. I love putting together matches that I'd like to see and I know other people would like to see. I've promoted some matches in the past where it's stuff I wanted to see and I know other people wanted to see, Hansen vs. Kamala, Hansen vs. Funk, Funk vs. Backlund, Funk vs. Gilbert, and stuff like that.

Keller: Who do you admire most in the wrestling business who you've dealt with personally?

Coraluzzo: Can I give you a tie? Jim Cornette and Terry Funk. Although I haven't heard from Cornette in a while. A few years ago, I don't know if you remember, Dutch Mantel put out a hotline number for Stan Hansen to call him because Hansen wouldn't call him back. Well, I haven't heard back from Cornette in the last four months, so I think I'm gonna get a Jim Cornette Hotline.

JIM CORNETTE

The following is part one of a "Torch Talk" series with one of the most respected figures in pro wrestling today, Jim Cornette. The interview was conducted Aug. 13, 1992. Now a promoter, once again a booker, and always a manager, in this series Cornette will share his thoughts on the state of professional wrestling today and his experiences and dreams involving Smoky Mountain Wrestling. In part one, the focus is on WCW and Cornette's assessment of Watts's achievements thus far, but first Cornette explains why he started the SMW promotion.

Keller: What inspired you to start SMW?

Cornette: First off, let me preface this. A lot of the guys are going to say, "He's screaming at us about kayfabe and he's talking to a sheet." There's obviously nothing I can do to prevent you or Dave (Meltzer) or anybody from saying, "Hey, Jim Cornette's running Smoky Mountain Wrestling." I will go to the biggest lengths I can go to make sure nobody in Knoxville, Tenn. or Beckley, W.Va. or whatever for the most part knows it. I don't want to be known to be connected with running the thing because that kills the credibility of the promotion. If a heel has anything to do with the promotion, it kills the



Jim Cornette

Wade Keller

credibility of the promotion.

That's what we need, credibility, because we're in a small area that we need repeat business in. If people don't believe in what we're doing, they're not going to come see it.

Having said that—and nobody will probably listen to this explanation anyway—since I can't stop you from saying anything about it and I can't stop anybody who reads the sheets from knowing about it, the least I can do is make sure you know the proper things and the correct things rather than rumors and half-truths and untruths. That's even worse than the other. So basically what I'm saying is I will never tell anybody for publication in an interview the things that are coming up as far as talent we are going to use or angles or programs or finishes or whatever...

Keller: Who would want you to? I wouldn't want to know those things ahead of time, except for possibly incoming talent.

Cornette: Jim Ross used to announce this guy is coming two months before he came. What would have happened if the booker decided to do a surprise thing where the guy just shows up out of nowhere? I was telling somebody this the other day: Didn't you like it a lot better when you used to go to the matches at Greensboro Coliseum or whatever and you knew something was up with the wrestling business, but you never knew when the title was going to change hands, you never knew who was coming in or who was gonna jump in the ring or what was going to happen? Then you enjoyed the show much more. Now, even the people who are smart to the business who read the sheets, if they would sit back and think to themselves, one of the reasons they want wrestling to be the way it used to be is because back then they had so much more fun watching it because they didn't know three weeks ago the guy was going to win the title. It was a surprise, a shock, you were on the edge of your seat. And now the fun's all gone.

Keller: To whatever degree that is the case, it's no one's fault other than those who leak information ahead of time, because once it is leaked and is public knowledge, not to report it is wrong and not to read it or hear it on the radio is near impossible.

Cornette: For example, Saturday night, some of the guys knew that the (SMW) title was going to change hands, but that's only because they figured something had better happen there, being that it was a big show. But everybody wasn't buzzing around the arena saying what was going to happen.

I want the sheet readers to enjoy the promotion, but I don't want them to examine it in as much detail as they do WCW and the WWF, saying this is going to happen and that is going to take place, because then they won't be able to enjoy it as much as other guys. This is something that can go back to the olden days, just like we say, "Wrestling the way it used to be and

wrestling the way you like it."

Keller: So, again, what inspired you to start SMW?

Cornette: It seemed to me there was a tremendous potential out there to not only make a lot of money, but to do something that I enjoy doing. I've been in the wrestling business longer than I wasn't in the wrestling business in my life right now because I'm 30 and I started fiddling around taking pictures when I was 14. I watched it for four or five years before that. So for almost my whole life I've loved this business one way or the other and wanted to be involved with it and I just hated to see what was being done to it and the way it was being run. There were so many people out there that wanted to see wrestling and weren't getting to see it and there's so much money to be made while doing it. So, to make a lot of money while doing something you want to do and love to do is too good to pass up. Hey, I'm not Eddie Graham and I'm not Bill Watts and I'm not Jerry Jarrett. Ole Anderson said it to me once, "You know, Cornette, I used to not like you. But there's so many other dumbshits have come along since I've first met you that you've gone up the ladder just by process of elimination."

So I'm smarter than most of the people in the wrestling business right now just because there's so many dumbshits in it. So I'm saying, gee, this has to be possible and it has to be done. The biggest problem that we have had right now in running this promotion is the problem that we've been handed by the damage that has been done by the people who have come in before us. Because I've seen talent half as good as ours and TV shows half as good as ours draw crowds twice as big as ours. The problem is over the past four or five years, the damage people have been subjected to and the damage that has been done to the business, that we have to overcome. It's like getting the bad taste out of your mouth after you've thrown up after eating a bad Whopper. You never want to eat a Whopper again. Well, then a couple of years go by and maybe you're finally driving by a Burger King and you're hungry, so you get one, and you like it again. But it takes a while to get that bad taste out of your mouth. That's what we're up against right now.

Our ratings are going up, everybody else's are going down. Our houses are going up, everybody else's except Jerry Jarrett's are going down. And, to me, when WCW's houses are going down and the WWF's houses are going down, Smoky Mountain Wrestling and Memphis are going up, that means we must be giving the people something they want to see that the other guys ain't giving them. It's not about having 20 million dollars, it's about doing something that makes sense.

Keller: Who was that in reference to?

Cornette: Everybody. Everybody that's done all this stuff. That goofy Herb Abrams?! And

Gordon Scozzari?! And I don't even know anything about this NAWA but all I know from a couple guys that have seen it is that it's horrible. So many stupid people have tried to start something in this business, when we go to TV stations now, chances are every station we go to has had an aborted wrestling program pitched to it, or a bunch of dumbsh--s that they knew were con men, so they don't trust that. Either that, or the WWF show is being cancelled or the WCW show is being cancelled.

Keller: What do you think about the direction WCW has gone since you left?

Cornette: You know, I didn't even get my cable hooked up the first month I was in the house, which goes to show how busy I was. Me, of all people, without cable. The only thing I see where I disagree with Bill Watts in any way is some of the talent he's picked, I would pick different talent to do it. But I don't know what he's planning. He obviously is thinking way ahead and has a plan for on down the road just like when we started this. Only an idiot would get in this business without figuring where he wanted to be in a year when you've got a business that's so screwed up.

What's the first thing we said on our first show? "Hey, there aren't any pads around this ring." The first thing Watts did was take up the mats. Besides the mats causing you to blow up your knees and break your ankles and everything else, you can jump off the roof and land on the mats and people will say, "Awe, but there's padding down there." But you can fall two feet onto the concrete floor and people will go, "Whooh!" It adds to the danger. If the guy can't take a bump on the concrete if he's a professional wrestler, well then Jesus H. Christ, we're not expecting you to do a Cactus Jack and dive head-first, but good lord, if I can get thrown out of the ring convincingly and land on the floor, then anybody who's a wrestler ought to be able to. So it's not like it's totally cold and heartless. It adds to the credibility of the show.

What's the first thing that Watts did? He banned the top rope. What's the first thing that we did? We banned the piledriver. Same thing, different move. It's just that it's easier to get along in a match without banning the top rope than the piledriver. You don't need a piledriver in a match. You don't need the top rope either. I think the piledriver is more dangerous and more visual. Watts decided the top rope, that's his call.

He's doing a lot of the same things that we did, so I can't obviously argue with it because it would make us look stupid. He's getting rid of guaranteed contracts and he's putting guys on salary as far as nightly guarantees. That only makes sense. Hey, I'm proud for a guy to make a million dollars if he can, but that's what a lot of guys in this business don't understand. Joel Goodhart, he paid guys more than anybody else in the country, then went out of business. As long

as it's not starvation wages like \$40 a night, that's ridiculous—we even pay our job guys more than that—you gotta pay people something. What we have is a guarantee for all of our talent that is reasonable. And everybody makes good money, nobody makes great money, but everybody's got steady work, as steady as we can make it, getting more dates, and everybody has the chance to be around later on when there's more.

So for Watts to eliminate the contracts makes sense because it will keep their business in business where more people will have jobs. Sooner or later, it's going to go back to where guys get paid on the house and then that's where the real incentive comes in. But now, with their business in such horrible shape through no fault of the wrestlers, you can't pay guys based on the houses because nobody would be making anything. So if the business was being well run and was running full time, then I think the guys should get paid on the house just like they used to. Because, if a business is well-run and you've got talent there, you're going to make money.

Keller: Is there anything you disagree with besides a couple talent acquisitions you question?

Cornette: No, that's basically the only thing I can think of. Danny Spivey? Geez, I wouldn't hire him to be a door stop. He thinks he's superman, he doesn't sell for anybody, he doesn't have a great looking body, he looks like sh--, he's just big, he barks like Brody but he doesn't have the personality, he can't talk, he looks like one of those—now I suppose he'll come, hunt me down, and probably kill me, but f--- it—he looks like one of those stereotypes of a wide-eyed, barking, slobbering wrestler. This guy played college football? Jesus. When I was working with the ill-fated Dynamic Dudes and they were working with Sid Vicious and Danny Spivey, the matches were the sh--s in large part due to Danny Spivey. He don't sell nothing and thinks he's Superman. He's only 25 pounds bigger than Johnny Ace and two inches taller. Some of the talent I question, but I don't know what he's thinking.

Keller: What did you think of Kip Frey's reign? Was it important to have a transition like Frey between Herd and Watts?

Cornette: It would have been important to get Herd out of there if they put Charles Manson in his spot. Kip Frey was just a nicer guy who was equally ignorant about the wrestling business. He was totally unprepared for what he got himself into.

Keller: Was TBS correct in hiring Bill Watts when they did, or was there another option?

Cornette: Well, the other option was to fold. It would have been proper to hire Bill Watts in 1988. It was four years too late. I don't see what else they could have done. Now, Watts is in the

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horrible position of being Mr. Last Resort, "If he can't do it, nobody can." But that might be the problem. They may have gone so long that nobody can. There's no question in my mind that they'd be kicking some ass right now if he had the job in '88, '89, or even '90. But, by '92, it could be beating a dead horse.

Keller: What about Rhodes? He's been one constant in the equation, a failing equation. You've worked with Rhodes and probably know him pretty well, so do you think under Watts's leadership Rhodes can be a real asset to a company?

Cornette: I don't know. Dusty Rhodes was one of the smartest guys that was ever in the wrestling business and he made a ton of money and drew a lot of money as both a wrestler and a booker. But the stuff that I've seen him doing since I've seen him back in WCW, if you'd have blind-folded me and asked, "Okay, who booked this," I would have never had a clue it was Dusty Rhodes. Just totally since he's been back, I haven't recognized any of the stuff he used to do except the stuff that was rehashed, but wasn't rehashed right, and it was his stuff to begin with. I don't know what happened. You can never tell what anybody can do while they're working for TBS because, geez, nobody's been able to do anything because of all the interference. You never know.

Dusty don't like working for people. When he was with Crockett, he had a free hand to do whatever as far as talent and booking. With Dusty, you can see that here's a guy who don't like working for people who are going to tell him

what to do and there's going to be confrontations. I can't imagine a creature that would be a boss to Bill Watts. I can't imagine Bill Watts working for anybody unless if General George S. Patton was still around, there might be somebody with a stronger personality than Bill Watts. Other than that, I can't imagine him working for anybody.

Everybody knocked Dusty. Dusty made a lot of money for a long time. I think Dusty's only problem was he did not take himself out of the picture when he should have.

Keller: But he's been virtually out of the picture except for occasional television appearances for the last 18 months and he has not shown anything above what he was doing when he drove Crockett out of business, so is pushing himself really the problem?

Cornette: When TBS bought the company and Dusty left, I think that was the end of Dusty Rhodes as we know it. Because, since he's come back, I think he absorbed too much from Vince. He's doing the same silly sh— as everybody else has done. So I don't know, but it's a different Dusty Rhodes, but that's from just seeing his TV and not being around him everyday, not knowing what his purposes are. It's just not the same sh—. There's no heat anymore.

But, of course, we don't have a lot of heat on our heels just because you can't get heat like you used to. This territory, you can get more heat than most places, just because the people are ripe for it. But, still there's been so much of it on TV and so much of it has been goofy.

Keller: What's been the toughest part about getting Smoky Mountain Wrestling started?

Cornette: When the territories went down, everybody said, "Ah, man, we can promote here." So they ran a bunch of cards with no-talents or they advertised people that didn't show up. It's hard to get credibility and draw a crowd now for a wrestling match because people have been burned so many times. And the slump is worse now than last October when we started this thing, especially compared to three years ago when I first thought of it. But, we have just tried to give them the best TV we possibly can and I worry and fret over it all the time to make it better. And we give them the best talent we can afford to give them. We basically deliver the show that we promise they get for a reasonable price. Nobody can tell me if you continue to do that eventually you won't do big business.

Keller: What's been the toughest part of being involved in the group thus far?

Cornette: Personally, just getting everything done. My wife is ready to kill me at all times because sometimes I'll sleep on the couch all night because I'll be working until six o'clock in the morning and have to get up at ten. I'll just nod off on the couch so I don't get too comfortable and oversleep. I'm always gone or always doing something. I make appointments to speak to her

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every now and then. You know, getting everything done that needs to get done is a tremendous hassle. Any kind of problem you can imagine occurs.

This is not a knock on them, but a lot of the wrestlers unless they've run their own shows, I didn't know all of the stuff that would have to be done. Where a lot of the wrestlers don't care about the business as a business, I've always been interested in the business part anyway. Besides that, personally, the hardest part is getting good television.

Just because, hey, the TV stations have better things to do than carry wrestling programs. It's not a situation where ratings are big boffo successes like they were a few years ago. They've already picked that up in Atlanta and New York, so the TV stations say, "Wrestling? Nobody's going to watch that sh—. Luckily, we're in an area with smaller markets where we can talk to the people easier and at least it's within the realm of reason. I mean, I wouldn't have done this in Philadelphia or Los Angeles or Denver or whatever because it ain't gonna work. I think all in all we have gotten a pretty good foundation. Every promotion I've seen start up the past few years has after their first year—which we're coming up on pretty quick since we taped our first TV in October even though it didn't air until February—they've been going downhill by this point. We're just beginning to go uphill. A lot of people said, "What the hell are you doing, you can't do that, you can't do this!"

I had people tell me, "You ought to get eight guys, put hoods on them, getcha' two stars and go with that because that will make money right off the bat. Well, if you spend \$800 putting a show on, you might make \$1,000, so that makes money, but that's about all the money you're going to make, because once they go and see a show like that, they ain't gonna come back.

You have to have talent, you have to have talent that the people know, and you need credibility so people don't think we're some backyard organization. We've got these guys that have done something in this business. You've got to pay for that. You've got to have a good TV production otherwise you're never going to get it on the air with these TV stations. Nick Gulas

used to have a daggum show, when the Intern got shot across the ring, his white uniform bled across the screen. It looked like a comet. That ain't gonna work anymore. So the two things that we have that we've spent a lot of money on are talent and TV production. And meanwhile, everybody thinks I'm getting rich. Joe Cazana makes more money than I do when we run three shows a week. I'm serious. I'm doing this because it's either this or I'll jump off a bridge. One of the reasons we haven't folded is that now that business is starting to pick up and we give them good shows, we are building credibility. When we return to a town, we at least keep that level of a crowd and in some cases it's rising.

We have spent a lot of money by wrestling standards. It used to be that when a guy started a wrestling territory, it would be a situation where they didn't have this oversaturation. You have to get some attention now. But at the same time, Gordon Scozzari, god love him, I hope has success with something in life, he spent \$70,000 or whatever in two days running two shows including a TV taping that he never even got shows put together off of. We could run for two months or something on that. The costs mount up, but you can't be crazy about it. You have to be halfway realistic. You have to know what your investors are wanting to do. You have to talk to them and say, "Look, here's the lowest that we can do this for, and here's the best we can do with this." Gordon just went off and spent whatever the heck. And Herb Abrams, I don't know what he's doing. I haven't seen one of his TV shows yet. He goes from place to place, bounces from here to there and he leaves a trail of checks behind him.

This Global thing, that's ridiculous. That's an example of a wrestling promotion run on a shoestring which in this day and age will not fly. The production values suck, they lost all of their top talent, and they won't even buy a new ring. But at the same time, they're still on ESPN through contractual quirks which means a large portion is subject to this sh—y wrestling show that will make the hate for wrestling go down in their genes so when they have kids, their kids will hate wrestling, too.

Keller: Do you have any desire to be national or be on ESPN eventually? Why not take the national exposure?

Cornette: No. Because for one thing, you'd have to shoot a completely separate show for ESPN than you would for the local stations. Because for one thing, ESPN won't let you use gimmicks, blood, excessive violence, all of which is the foundation of professional wrestling. Secondly, why should I as a TV station owner put any kind of television show on the air when somebody can tune in to cable in my market and watch that show maybe at a more convenient time. It does nothing for my station. It makes no sense to put a TV show on cable when you're

running against yourself and pissing your TV station off. Also, I don't care whether people in San Bernardino can see my wrestling or not because I'm not going to run San Bernardino. And the advertising income to me ain't worth the extra headaches and hassles that go along with it. And also, the oversaturation of wrestling on the airwaves. I don't want my program on anyplace I'm not running or not gonna run. Maybe then, somebody three states away can start another territory and they won't have so much wrestling on so they have a chance and then I'd have somebody to work with later on and the wrestlers would have some place to go.

It's proven now that a national wrestling organization is just not gonna go. Vince had the best shot at it and he did it for a couple of years and couldn't sustain it. What gets over in New York won't go over in California and that won't go in Florida and that won't work in Tennessee.

Keller: Is pay-per-view something SMW would like to do down the line?

Cornette: There's only a limited number of stars that would draw on a national pay-per-view. As a matter of fact, very few if any looking at their numbers. If I could do a pay-per-view that could be ordered only in the towns I'm running, which I guess you could if you just hooked up those cable systems, let's say that I do that. Then let's say that I run that show and I charge \$15. Let's say 10,000 people buy it. Well, that's \$150,000. By the time you split it with the cable company or whatever, you get maybe half of that and then you pay the guys. Then why would fans go to the arenas and buy the souvenirs? If I had that many towns, I'd run a card in all those towns and try to make money off the dadgum houses.

Keller: What has surprised you so far in getting SMW going?

Cornette: It's been surprising how hard it is to get on TV. Not having been out there talking to TV stations the past couple of years, we were all surprised just how much they are indifferent to wrestling now in the places where it used to be the best rated show in the market. What's easier than I thought is the dadgum arenas want you so bad, they don't know what to do. Because here's places that used to have wrestling 20 times a year that don't have anything now. They want wrestling back because they used to make a ton of money off of it. Every place we've gone, we've gotten whatever date we've wanted, no problem. There's other places that we want to go when we get the TV coverage that we will have equally no problem getting in.

Keller: What do you think is your weakest point in running SMW behind the scenes?

Cornette: Having to do 14 things at once is one of the tougher things. It's tougher to come up with stuff for yourself when you're a booker

because you're worried about what everybody else is doing.

Keller: Do you find your on-screen character suffering creatively because of that?

Cornette: Yeah, occasionally sometimes I've seen that and now I'm trying to correct that by staying up an extra hour. At the same time, you can't put too much emphasis on your stuff and let everybody else go or you end up with the old egotistical booker syndrome.

Keller: Do you ever feel yourself pushing yourself too much and having to pull back the reigns?

Cornette: As a matter of fact, I didn't give myself as much time on TV as several other people wanted me to until they told me to do it. I didn't want people to think I was hogging the show. With a lot of these guys, you can say, "Here's what we want to end up with. Get there." It's great because you don't need to lead them by the hand to get them there because they have experience and know what they're doing.

My weakest point, though, is that I want to believe that everybody means everything they say to me. I generally want to think, "This person wouldn't want to slack off, that person wouldn't be lazy, that person wouldn't try to get an extra dollar out of me." Tim and Sandy are constantly screaming at me, "Look what this guy's done or look at what this guy is saying or what this guy is doing behind your back." I have a hard time with that as far as being in business. My attitude is that everybody in the world wants to go full throttle



Jim Cornette

and devote their entire existence to the professional wrestling business and the furthering of it at the cost of it to themselves and their bank accounts and their bodies. I have a hard time thinking anybody would have a different opinion.

Keller: What is your strongest attribute?

Cornette: I don't think I blow anybody away with anything. My strongest point is I want this thing to work. Even if I do right or do wrong or do different, nobody can say I slacked off or didn't try hard because I didn't care. My family and ex-friends, the people I haven't called since this started, will tell you that.

Keller: How have you changed since your time has become more of a commodity and how do you think people perceive you as being different now?

Cornette: One of the things is I don't have time to bullsh— around with people on the phone. Poor Dennis Coraluzzo, I haven't talked to him in two months. It's not that I don't like these people, it's just I don't have time to talk to my wife who lives in the same house. A lot of the guys, boy, that you've known for a long time, as soon as you become a promoter, I still like them, I don't think any different about them, and I'm not going to name anybody by name, but a couple people have disappointed me. We're still friends, we're still on the same side, I'm just trying to do this and I think you're great and you can help me. They say, "But we want this and we want to get that and we want to get this other thing." All of a sudden it's the adversarial thing or it's cold business. It's not everybody, it's not a lot of people, but it is the case with a few.

Keller: What is the thing you miss most from your days as a non-promoter?

Cornette: Just worrying about me and the Midnight Express and not worrying about everyone else. I don't watch tapes anymore unless it's Smoky Mountain Wrestling. This literally takes every bit of time that I have, but I don't mind because one of these days when we're all famous and wealthy and the buildings are all selling out, we can say we really accomplished something.

Keller: Hopefully it will then be running itself more than it is now.

Cornette: Tim Horner helps out a tremendous amount. Sandy Scott helps out a tremendous amount, but when it's three people basically that's doing what 7 or 8 or 10 people should be, then it's hard. Who's to say there are those qualified people that can do those things? There's some, but then you've gotta pay them so it's worth their while and then it's harder to turn a profit.

Keller: So far in Smoky Mountain Wrestling, how are the core group of fans supporting

your group differently from those in the Mid-South territory, Memphis, and even Dallas?

Comette: They're not really different. They're different people, just as people are always different from each other. We've had the coliseum tell us they're getting calls from people they haven't seen in five years. Les Thatcher came to the Volunteer Slam and he said, "I saw those people coming in the late '70s." You gotta' pick up new fans, too, and that's the hard part because wrestling's no longer cool to watch, it's hard to pick up the newer fans, so you have to get them interested in what you're doing, rather than just that it's wrestling. But your core group is starting to follow the guys around. You have to have those matches running every several weeks or days or whatever to get people back in the groove again.

Keller: What are the keys to SMW continuing to grow? What will need to be accomplished for you to be successful?

Comette: We've got to keep giving them talent. We've got to keep giving them what they paid for. It doesn't mean that every time they come, they need to see the finish of the match that suits them. They have to see what was advertised and they have to enjoy the overall show. If they leave mad, that's okay, because they at least got into the show. As long as they don't leave indifferent. If we give them all of those basics, they will come. It's like eating vegetables when you were a kid and your mother used to make you eat them. Maybe you ended up liking them, but you sure didn't like them at first. Sometimes you just need to snatch them by the nose and make them go and say, "Hey, this is different than what you've seen that you got turned off by. All those hundreds or thousands of wrestling fans are still around. They haven't all died. They used to pay to go see the matches. They just got pissed off and it's our job to get them un-pissed-off."

Keller: Do you see fans saying SMW is minor league and end up being perceived as a feeder system for the WWF?

Comette: I don't think people will have an image of it as minor league. For these people here, this is their home. East Tennessee or Virginia or West Virginia. This is home for them. They wouldn't live in New York to save their lives.

Keller: The NBA didn't kill off college or high school basketball in smaller markets.

Comette: But that's not even the thing. I'm trying to think of a way to put that. Paul Orndorff is not minor league on any scale. As far as managers go, I don't think that I am. I don't think as far as tag teams go that the Heavenly Bodies are or the Rock & Roll Express and Ronnie Garvin and name after name that we've got or will be getting. Terry Gordy was with us early. We're not minor league, what we are is a regional promotion that serves these people regularly

rather than going all over the country. We give them what they want to see. We don't care if the people in Montana want to see it or not, we're not going there. The amount of money you want to spend shouldn't be the delineation between minor league and major league. We could spend \$60,000 on a show like the WWF does and lose \$40,000. Or we could spend \$8,000 and lose \$2,000, who's better off. The fans are going to get behind the team that is part of their town, that goes to their town all the time, and the team that's part of their community. Smoky Mountain is the local team. If we had 14 nobodies and three stars, then we would have a minor league look. But we don't. The wrestlers we have are known. Danny Davis is more major league to a lot of these fans than anybody from the WWF. I don't think we have a minor league look. We have a better show than the WWF and come more often. The South Atlantic thing was minor league. The Global thing, you can see that's minor league.

I think we go far enough so people can look at us as a competitive promotion with good shows without totally bankrupting ourselves. That's the one thing, we do have a good commitment from our backer. He realizes talent is necessary, too. He is the sharpest guy I've ever met. Obviously none of this would have happened without him. After working at TBS, you get a bad impression of people in business in general, but this guy is not in that mold.

Keller: You want to keep the name of your backer secret?

Comette: It wouldn't do any good to tell who this guy is when, number one, he's been so kind to us to allow us to do this and to get such a fantastic start at this to have every Tom, Dick, and Harry harassing him and you know that will happen. He can tell the difference between the snake oil salesmen, but why subject him to that. I don't want the guy harassed by a bunch of goofs.

Keller: How important is it and how soon must it happen that SMW is turning a major profit, or is the major motivation surviving and staying in the black?

Comette: I'm insulted by people who figured we'd be done by now. Like I'm going to piss off everyone in the wrestling business when I've never done anything else and I'm going to move to another city and buy a house and go through all of this unless I didn't think it was going to work, unless I was sure it was going to work. I'm either going to do this or jump off a bridge. And like I said, I wouldn't have done this with any other guy except the backer we found because I've never been as impressed by anybody—not to say people have been trying to throw millions of dollars at me—but I've never been as impressed with anybody as I have been with this guy as far as how much he's got on the ball. He knows and knew it wasn't going to be the sort of thing to make a profit in six months. To be honest with

you, it's been slower than we thought, but it hasn't been horrifying and we haven't gone out there and been riding in limousines and staying at the Marriot. We've shown him we're trying to take as good a care of what we're doing as possible. So as long as we continue to show interest and continue to get good talent and continue to give good television shows and go in the right direction, then we're fine.

If we had started out at level four on a one-to-ten scale and were at level two, we would have serious problems. But we didn't. We're going in the right direction. It's not blockbuster, but it's good.

Keller: How long would it take of not seeing that progression before your backer would pull out or you might even say, "I'm not going to take this anymore?"

Comette: I'll never give up. As far as the other part of the question, I can't answer that because we've never had a timetable on it. We only intend to do increasingly better, even if it's only a little bit at a time. We cut expenses where we can and we put the money into better places through experience. But there's not a timetable where one year after we started we're going to be making X amount of dollars. We can predict, but you can't tell for sure. We'll just see what happens.

This is very important. The difference between the way we run our operation and the way a lot of others have is that we're sure we're using somebody else's money—and that's an invitation to disaster with a lot of people, especially in this business. But I look at it like this. This guy has given me the chance to do what I've always wanted to do. When somebody does something like that, they get over with you. They just do. Number two, like I said, he's a guy that I think would be a friend regardless of what our connection was. What I'm trying to do, and Sandy (Scott) feels the same way, Tim (Homer) feels the same way, everybody who's involved with this feels the same way, we're not just using somebody else's money to use and if it don't work out, it don't work out.

It's like every dollar that I spend it's like it's coming out of my pocket because I'm responsible for this guy's money. I want to make sure that if money's spent, it has to be spent. Now, I've known a lot of people in the wrestling business and I've heard of two dozen more, that would get a hold of somebody and they'd drain him by staying at the Marriot and riding limousines and flying first class. That's why they don't succeed because sooner or later, whoever's putting up the money gets pissed and sees you spending money on yourself. If they don't get pissed, they still reach the end of their rope. And if they would have put the money into the business they would have had a job five years down the line. That's what I'm looking at. I don't mean to harp on it, but everybody's saying Comette must be rich. I'm making nothing, I'm making nothing. I've

turned down opportunities for contracts the times WCW's called me for ten times more than I'm making now because I think if I try to watch every dollar and put it in the proper place which is talent and TV and getting the shows out there, then I'll have something to do five years from now that will not only make me a good living, but that I'll love doing. So I think that's the difference. I'm not saying everybody who's ever tried to start a wrestling company is a crook, but that's the difference between what we're doing and what a lot of other people have done. We're not trying to soak somebody. We're trying sincerely to make it go and as a result I'm driving without new tires on my car because I'd rather see this succeed.

Keller: Why do you want to be with SMW making less money than you could with WCW? Is it (a) you're really frustrated with the way WCW is portraying wrestling, (b) the limited creativity and bureaucracy that you have to deal with isn't worth it, or (c) just the grind of being on the road traveling such long distances at the command of somebody else?

Cornette: All of the above. Everything you mentioned I hated like crazy. As a matter of fact, you mentioned it very well. Also (d) airplanes. You know how I am about flying. I can accept doing one or two things that I don't like to do in order to do three or four things I do like to do and earn good money, but I can't accept liking nothing about what I'm doing. The only thing I enjoyed in my last two years with World Championship Wrestling was managing the Midnight Express and they wanted to fix it so I couldn't do that, either. My wife screamed at me to quit six months before I did. It just wasn't worth it.

Keller: Not to remain on the pessimistic side, but what if it becomes even obvious to you that you're beating a dead horse? Let's use an extreme: Your backer dies, his estate goes to his aunt who hates pro wrestling, and arenas are now empty, and all the wrestlers have moved on to another territory where they can make more money. What is left for you besides jumping off a bridge? Might you move to another part of the country and try the same thing or hypothetically might you end up back working for another promotion?

Cornette: It's not like I could never work for somebody again because I couldn't handle not being the boss or something like that. It's not like that. But, if Smoky Mountain Wrestling does not succeed, then I will have come to the conclusion that wrestling as I know it and like it does not work anymore and I will have to find something else to do.

Keller: So the chances of seeing you in a national promotion, unless you temporarily left SMW for WCW for a few months just to...

Cornette: That would never happen. Basically, if Smoky Mountain Wrestling goes, I'm here for

life. If it don't go, like I said, I will be very disappointed and disheartened and I will come to the conclusion that wrestling as I know it and like it is not going to work anymore and get something else to do.

Keller: So in your mind, and you know better than anybody, there is no chance any fan will ever have a chance to see you on a national promotion if the wrestling scene stays similar to what it is today? You can't see yourself ever in the WWF or WCW?

Cornette: I can't see it. When I was booking this territory in the car—me, Bobby, and Stan in 1988—up until now I just always figured this will work. I believe, I think this will go. I can't put a timetable on it, but I know it will happen eventually. If we are able to get to that point, which I think we will, then I am here for good. And if we don't, I will consider it my big swan song effort and I'm going to be doing something else and what that may be I have no idea.

Keller: If it doesn't work, what do you do? Do you see your top options being radio, entertainment?

Cornette: I love to do radio. I've even had a couple people offer me jobs at radio stations when I've gone to them just to plug wrestling shows. The guys were serious. That's the only thing I can think of that I might really enjoy doing.

Keller: Then I suspect Howard Stern will be investing in SMW because if you get into radio, he's in trouble.

Cornette: That's the only thing I think I might enjoy, and that would still be a tough transition.

Keller: If you could add one wrestler to SMW, anybody who's out there, who would that be?

Cornette: The obvious answer would be Ric Flair. Speaking strictly personally from the heart, Bobby Eaton, and I don't think that's going to surprise anybody, either. But thinking about what might have taken place that couldn't, I wish that Bob Holy hadn't quit the wrestling business. As far as taking somebody who could have done something here in two or three or four years or whatever, he was the best talent that I've seen that nobody's ever seen. He had the most potential of anybody that I can think of anywhere in the wrestling business, I don't care who he is.

Keller: What was it about him that impressed you?

Cornette: For one thing, he's a Bobby Eaton clone. Even Bobby Eaton's wife watching tapes said, "Gee, Bobby, he looks just like you." Just the way he moved and the stuff he did. He couldn't talk, he maybe could have learned. But I just saw his work and his personality in the ring just caught my eye. There would be my three. Flair obviously for purely financial greed, wanting to have the greatest wrestler in the world



Ric Flair

Wade Keller

right now here in the promotion. Bobby Eaton for wanting to have one of the greatest who's also my best friend. Bob Holy for wanting to have the dadgum guy who I think could be the biggest star with effort and experience.

Keller: Who is a known name who you think is a sleeper? Terry Taylor, Ted DiBiase, somebody totally different?

Cornette: I've got a couple, and I don't want to mention them because I think there's a chance I could get them and I don't want to tip anybody off. It's not that anybody couldn't figure that out, anyway.

Keller: How much do you feel you are still learning about pro wrestling or do you feel, philosophically, you know enough and now it's time to make what you know work? Or is there still a lot of figuring out you need to do?

Cornette: Oh, geez, I would hope if I was going to the hospital for open heart surgery, I would sincerely hope that the doctor didn't think he had learned everything there is to learn. Like we said before, you never stop finding out things and learning things. Plus, it's so complicated. Towns are different. What will work one place won't work in another. Like I said before, I'm not the smartest person in the business or even close to it, but there have been so many other dumbsh— that have come along, it makes me look a whole lot better by comparison. So we may not do the best wrestling promotion in history, but we can certainly do one of the better ones people have seen in a long time.

Keller: Who you know of whom you admire for their amazing ability to understand, comprehend, talk about, relate the business to other people in the promoting area? Is it Bill

Watts, Vince McMahon, someone else from the past or present?

Comette: I've never been around Vince, but I have talked to him on the phone and met him once. I don't really know. He's got a different picture of wrestling than I do, obviously. Bill Watts, there is nobody I admire more. Geez, I would say if I broke down the time I've worked in the business, the year I worked for him I learned more about the wrestling business than any four or five others years. There is nobody I admire more brains-wise and promotion-wise than Bill Watts. I think that at this point, though, only divine intervention could help out down there. But I certainly don't have anything against Bill Watts.

Jerry Jarrett, people knock him and he's even been mad at me sometimes and I wasn't always sure why. After I left, somebody would come over and say, "Jarrett's mad at you." What the hell did I do? I don't know. He's a very smart guy. The only drawback to Jarrett is he would sometimes have a short attention span in that he'd jump in there and get things going and then he'd leave it to other people and it would fall back down again while he was doing something else. But he was always a very smart guy. Look, the guy has stayed in business past everybody. Past everybody.

Keller: What do you think about what's going on between the USWA and WWF right now given that some people have speculated about SMW maybe eventually hooking up with a national promotion?

Comette: Here's my opinion. If you have a regional group and you work with one of the big groups, then if they send you their stars and if their stars aren't on your next card, people might say, "Let's wait until the next time everybody is on the card. Vice versa, when you send them your guys, are they going to let your guys beat their guys? Unless it is promoted as an equal situation where the USWA is as important as the WWF, somebody will end up looking minor league and you don't need that.

Keller: If anyone could convince fans, Jerry Lawler could, if he says the USWA is the Tennessee group and the WWF is the New York group, but neither is inherently bigger. Then it becomes a home-town pride situation in many cases. Is that a different situation beneficial to both parties, such as Texas vs. Tennessee?

Comette: In that case it was the same guy running both organizations.

Keller: But can they do the same thing with separate people running the groups?

Comette: I have no idea, but I can say one thing. Vince McMahon may think he's the king of the sharp deals, but I've never known anyone to come out on the better end of a deal with Jerry Jarrett. That could be really interesting. Watch and see. If something's there to be had, Jarrett

will end up on the better end of the deal.

I think especially since we're just getting started—they're already established—we don't need to be messing with anybody else. They have the opinion in Atlanta that they're the big promotion, they're hot sh—, and they could use us as a feeder system. Basically that means they send us their castoffs that are stale to death on television and want us to promote them as the supposed big stars from TV that we would just love to have. Meanwhile, if we had a guy that was ready to make some money, they'd take him and put him on their show and that's the last we'd see of him. That's the way it always works out. And besides that, to my mind, if you associate with a group that is proven to be phony which the WWF certainly is and WCW for the past four years has had the reputation of being, then why isn't your wrestling phony, too?

Keller: Eventually if you established yourself and WCW reestablished credibility in your eyes, do you see a possible working relationship like the old territories even if it was a regional vs. national group?

Comette: That would be the only way you could do it, is a working agreement like the old territories had. You would send in tapes of a guy for four or five weeks and then he would come in and work full time. It couldn't be a situation where he works their TV every week and he just bops in now and then. The old territories worked hand in hand because one group's TV wasn't seen in the other group's territory. Now it's different. I would rather work with Jarrett in Memphis and have them send tapes over—this is down the road, too, because we've got to get our own thing established first. Eventually have them send tapes over adding something to each other's card. But our show doesn't air where theirs does and vice versa. I've had some people ask if we're going to get TV in Nashville. No, why should I get TV in Nashville? They're already running once a week there, so they obviously don't need more live wrestling. So why have your TV over there? If it takes away attendance from another territory, then you're defeating the purpose of trying to get back to territories. You don't want to hurt them. You'd like to help them if you could, but at least stay out of their way.

Keller: Has there been any sort of communication between you and Jarrett yet?

Comette: It's just been a situation where, like Dirty White Boy and Tom Prichard, they at first said they were just going to come over here. They didn't know whether it would work or not. Their major towns are run on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and ours are usually Thursday, Friday, Saturday. So it's working out fine, our guys get more days to work, and everybody hopefully is happy. We haven't talked about doing any official trading back and forth yet. Why do that before we can help them out? Also,

If you have a regional group and you work with one of the big groups, then if they send you their stars and if their stars aren't on your next card, people might say, "Let's wait until the next time everybody is on the card. Vice versa, when you send them your guys, are they going to let your guys beat their guys? Unless it is promoted as an equal situation where the USWA is as important as the WWF, somebody will end up looking minor league and you don't need that.

there's the problem of our guys, Tom and Dirty White Boy are raving babyfaces over there and here they're heels. That wouldn't work.

Keller: Do you think there are enough people with similar ambitions and enough knowledge to start more regional promotions around the country in upcoming years?

Comette: There ain't gonna be no more national promotions. That's it. Whether the local ones return depends on whether you get (a) somebody with the money to do it right, (b) somebody with the knowledge and experience to do it right, and (c) somebody with the talent. Those are basically the three ingredients that you need.

Keller: Are there enough a-b-c situations waiting to develop?

Comette: I know a lot of people with the ability, a lot of talent, and I know a few people with money, but none of the three in combination. Eventually it is going to happen, it's just a matter of when. Buck Robley tried to start that thing up down there (in Louisiana) and he's been successful in the past. He has some strange methods. I had never met him until I went down there on a few of those shows. The problem is the guy putting up the money for him was a complete moron. I told everybody when I came back up here after my first show down there that if they made it past four months, I would burn my tennis rackets in the middle of the ring because I don't know anything about the wrestling business. Well they didn't because the guy who

The only good the steroids scandal has done for the business is to take all the emphasis off the muscleheads. That's been great because once again, that's something else that's wrong with the business, everybody thinks they've got to be 300 lbs. and Mr. Universe to be a wrestler. That's a detriment to the actual performing ability of the wrestler.

was putting up the money was a complete nut.

Keller: Do you really see national pay-per-views disappearing and World Championship Wrestling becoming Atlanta Championship Wrestling?

Cornette: When I say there's not going to be any national promotions, I mean there's not going to be any new ones. The WWF, for all the problems that they've had, are still pretty well off. WCW, I don't see them becoming a regional promotion. They will either remain national or it will cease to exist when they finally get tired of pouring money down the well. I don't think the TBS people would take the demotion and status of being regional again. But Watts definitely has tons of the right ideas and definitely is going about things excellently in getting rid of the contracts with a lot of the stuff he's doing. The problem is whether the people that he ultimately works for are going to allow him to finish the job, which is going to take a long time.

Keller: What should be at the top of Watts's agenda?

Cornette: See, I don't know how you would run a national promotion in this day and age because you can't get heat on the heels. The more heat you try to get on them, the better off they'll like them in Philadelphia.

Keller: Although Rick Rude has serious heat?

Cornette: He's got a real obnoxious image that a lot of people don't like, but for the most part it's hard to get any heat on the heels and it's hard to get a babyface over because people see babyfaces now as wimps. And add to that hardly anybody knows how to do it anymore. It's a real problem. I wouldn't even attempt to tackle a national promotion just because you can't do stuff that

will please everybody on the same television program.

Keller: What do you think of Ron Simmons as someone to lead the promotion?

Cornette: I would have taken a year to do it instead of two months, and then it would have worked. I mean, he's a great athlete and he's come a long way as a worker and he's a good talker, and he's a credit to his race. No, no, no. (laughs)

I'm kidding, of course. I have to tell a story. Nick Gulas, they had this former football player, Shoney Bowynn, he became a wrestler for a very brief time because Nick wanted a big black babyface. So he brings him out on TV one time and he's trying to give him the big build-up as only Nick can and he goes on and on about how great Shoney Bowynn is and this and that. Finally, he tried to say what he thinks will be the ultimate compliment, "Shoney Bowynn, you're a real credit to your race." But he can't get the word "credit" to come to his mind, so instead he said, "Shoney Bowynce, I just want to say right now that you're a, a, a, a, thing to your race." (laughs) For Nick Gulas, that was the ultimate compliment.

But anyway, there's nothing wrong with Ron Simmons, but he's not out of the pack yet. But nobody else is, either.

Keller: Okay, then who would you have used as World Champion for the year that Simmons was being built-up?

Cornette: Well, Jim Barnette used to always get hot when I'd say this. We'd sit down at the booking meetings and they'd say during March, "We have to draw money in April. What are we going to do?" I'd say, "No matter what we do, we aren't going to draw any money during April, so why don't we just write April and May off and try to make some money in June."

Whatever they do, they aren't going to draw for the next year, so just have some good shows, keep things entertaining, get some interest going, and then try to slowly get some guys over. That's what we've tried to do. The guys you start with aren't ever going to get over. They're the guys that were there when you started. The people you introduce after that are the ones that get over.

Keller: Is there anything they are doing that they should not be doing?

Cornette: The one thing, kayfabe is great. There hasn't been enough of it and there needs to be more as far as how the shows are presented and the guys out in public. If I went and saw one of my babyfaces and one of my heels sitting in a Denny's after a show, I'd fire both of them on the spot, I don't care who it was, just because they ought to have more pride than that.

But I don't know if I would put those poor guys on the first flight out. I mean, it's hard enough on the road the way it was. That's probably causing more dissension than anything

they're paying anybody.

Keller: What do you think of wrestling and the WWF without Hulk Hogan?

Cornette: They will never be as successful as they were even if Hulk Hogan comes back.

Keller: What will they have to do to stay profitable without Hogan as their leader?

Cornette: To be truthful, I very seldom pay attention to anything they do unless I can catch Flair because he's a friend. And I really like the Undertaker. But other than that, I'm really not informed enough to say. It's just another totally different style of thing that I'm not into.

Keller: What do you think of the scandals? Has it been good or bad for wrestling?

Cornette: The only way it has helped wrestling is that it's part of the "scorched Earth policy"—before things can get back to normal and back to the way they used to be, everything that has happened over the last ten years has to be shot to hell. So, if it gets wrestling off television and gets some of this sh—out of the way, and the stuff off the shelves in the toy stores, and hurts their business, in the end it will help a lot of other people's. But it will take a long period of time to come back around.

If somebody wants to pump themselves full of monkey hormones, that's fine. I don't care. In the real world, if somebody stands to make some money, they don't care how they do it. So if somebody wants to take steroids, that's their business. If they feel like they have to, that's not right. The only good the steroids scandal has done for the business is to take all the emphasis off the muscleheads. That's been great because once again, that's something else that's wrong with the business, everybody thinks they've got to be 300 lbs. and Mr. Universe to be a wrestler. That's a detriment to the actual performing ability of the wrestler. So I'm not looking at it like, "Thank god, all these poor innocent athletes won't have to take steroids anymore." Geez, if somebody came up to me and said I could have a million dollars if I robbed a bank, well, no thanks, I think I'd find something else to do. So, if they're going to do it, fine, that's their problem. But with all the publicity, now we won't need the muscle guys anymore and we can get back to some guys that can learn to work.

Keller: What about the negatives?

Cornette: It's just more of a chance for people to think professional wrestling is a dirty, scummy, slimy thing, which is once again more short-term humiliation we have to take, but in the long-term maybe will actually end up signalling the turnaround for smaller groups. It's like short-term for WCW cutting back on the guaranteed contracts. So, for now, 40 guys aren't making great money, but in the short-term, it opens the door for 150 guys to make good money.

JIM CORNETTE

Jim Cornette surprised a lot of people when he appeared at WWF television tapings on July 25, 1993 in New York. He now continues to work full time behind the scenes and on camera for Smoky Mountain Wrestling, but has established what appears to be the start of a long relationship with the WWF. In this "Torch Talk" with Cornette, he discusses the background of the WWF deal, whether he feels he handled the situation well by keeping the WWF deal secret from SMW employees, and he explains why he is doing something that he says will help business that one year ago he explicitly explained would be bad for business. The two and a half hour interview was conducted by phone on July 28, 1993 from Cornette's home in Morristown, Tenn.

Wade Keller: First, give us a little bit of background on how your negotiations to work with the WWF began.

Jim Cornette: It was about six weeks from the gestation period. I won't mention names I talked to, but actually I got a phone call. "Hey, would you guys be interested in making some shots for us?" I said, "Well, we're awful busy. We work most weekends." "Well, give it some thought." "Okay, whatever." It was just a feeling out thing. They know, like everybody else in the world



Jim Cornette

Wade Keller

knows, if they can do something for Smoky Mountain Wrestling, then they've got me. If they're just talking about extra work, which I need like a hole in the head, or money, which I need but still would bypass in order to work for Smoky Mountain, that doesn't get it.

Basically the idea they proposed to me was, "Hey, The Heavenly Bodies come up and work the pay-per-view, SummerSlam, and do some TV leading up to it." As it got closer to the time, it became, "Why don't the Heavenly Bodies work with the Steiners?" Bottom line is, it was a series of several phone calls. They called me. I'm not saying they were calling, pleading with me to please come work for them. There was interest there and I told them from the start that if it could benefit Smoky Mountain, I'll do it. If it can't, I'm really not interested right now.

One of the things I agreed upon was that nobody would know about it before we showed up because they wanted it to be a surprise. I think everybody in the building was shocked that night and I think the people when they see it on TV will be shocked.

Keller: The WWF insisted you make it a surprise?

Cornette: Correct. I don't think it was a surprise on the level of Lex Luger being the one to slam Yokozuna, but still it's good to have surprises on TV. I'm not trying to make this out to be the biggest thing that happened to the WWF. So we didn't tell anyone we were going. The gist of it is—this is why I was surprised everybody was upset—all this time, everybody has raked Vince McMahon over the coals for not acknowledging other wrestlers' histories, not acknowledging other places they've worked, not acknowledging the existence of any other promotion in the world. He does all of those things in one fell swoop with us and people are mad. I would have thought they'd go, "Damn, he finally did it and look who he did it with. Isn't that a kick in the ass."

Keller: What are the pluses for Smoky Mountain Wrestling that enticed you to agree to work with the WWF?

Cornette: The Heavenly Bodies are a perennial top tag team. They are seen on another national wrestling promotion's telecast which just gets us wider exposure and credibility. These guys seem like a bigger deal because they're fighting for the WWF tag team titles. I'm the top manager for SMW. I get more exposure, so people are looking and saying, "Gee, this guy's been everywhere. This team goes everywhere. They'll face anybody." We're the only team in the business, the only wrestlers in the business, who have in the space of six months been in WCW, the WWF, and still concentrated in Smoky Mountain. It looks to our fans like these guys mean what they say when they say they are the best tag team in the world and they'll go

anywhere to prove it.

Smoky Mountain Wrestling is acknowledged on the WWF TV show as "the hottest promotion in the South." That does make us look like something. I don't care whether the people in Idaho think that or not unless they are going to order tapes by mail. When the people in our territory see it, maybe they'll check us out if they haven't been. It gives me a lot of credibility to be speaking for their World Heavyweight Champion because they don't just throw guys from the backyard in Tennessee in that spot.

Keller: Beyond the exposure part, is there an agreement for SMW to have periodical use of WWF talent?

Cornette: I wouldn't be surprised. Bossman is here in August. That was something that took place independently, but it had to be cleared through the WWF office because he's under contract with them. At first, I had talked to Bubba ("Bossman" Ray Traylor). He couldn't really get anything done with it. He said they wanted it cleared through the office. At that time, I wasn't particularly having regular conversations with anyone in the office. I said I won't call because I didn't know how they felt about it. If I had known it was going to be this damn easy, I would have called a long time ago. There's possibilities of talent exchanges either way, which I think will help us draw some houses when not overused. Please underline that. And I think it also will be an incentive for guys to work here because they know that the WWF will be keeping up with what we are doing and that at least there's an open conversation. If somebody is finished here or comes here and has the potential to go up there, it might be easier for them. This is all in the early stages. That's a plus for all concerned. I did 900 number stuff, not only talking about the Bodies taking on the Steiners, but once again acknowledging Smoky Mountain Wrestling.

I'm not trying to go up there and use their television purely for that. I'm not trying to take advantage of their offer to just blatantly say, "Smoky Mountain Wrestling, Smoky Mountain Wrestling" every time I open my mouth. Then they're going to get pissed and it won't last long.

Keller: What about the WWF plugging SMW events on their syndicated television shows?

Cornette: They agreed to plug our shows in their event centers in Knoxville because they don't run live shows here. We're looking at Johnson City, too, because it gets bumped a lot and I wasn't sure exactly when it was on. They do have a weekly show in Johnson City. They're not on a lot, to be honest, in the other places we run. That's something that's open.

I have to say that Jim Ross and Pat Patterson, really everybody, Blackjack Lanza, everybody up to and including Vince McMahon was as fair with us and as nice as they could be. They fulfilled everything they said they would on the

phone.

Keller: What about the length of this agreement? Is this all verbally agreed upon so far and only through SummerSlam or is there more to it?

Cornette: The only thing I signed was a release that said they could show the TVs I worked on. That's it. If they tell me I'm going to do something, then okay, I'll believe it until they don't do it. The reverse is true. If I give them my word I'm going to be somewhere and do something, I'll do it.

Keller: Was there any insinuation or outright discussion that if they were going to invest so much time and energy into pushing you in August that they would expect you to be around to ride the momentum in September?

Cornette: I didn't know I was even going to be with Yokozuna until I got there. They had been kicking it around and asked, "Hey, would you like to do this?" I said, "Are we plugging Smoky Mountain Wrestling with the Bodies?" They said yes. I said, "Okay, I'll do whatever." The whole point of things boils down to if I tell them I'll do something and I do it, I assume they'll keep using us and keep the relationship open. If I don't, then they got the option to say, "Okay, you didn't do what we said, so screw it." And vice-versa, if they started telling me stuff that didn't materialize, then I'd just go home.

Keller: Are you open to having a long-term relationship with the World Wrestling Federation in terms of being its lead manager and working television, pay-per-views, and select Madison Square Garden or other house shows?

Cornette: See, that's jumping the gun a little bit. The one thing I don't have is a lot of time. I don't want to get on a lot of airplanes. I don't want to bury myself by saying yes or no to anything because it would be burying myself either way because people will start assuming things.

Keller: But you haven't ruled out doing more with the WWF after SummerSlam?

Cornette: I don't believe it has to end after SummerSlam. They truthfully did not tell me a lot of plans they had after that. I'm looking at this as primarily, we have a territory and they have a territory—their territory is a little bit bigger than ours—if they want to keep on working our territory with theirs, then that's fine.

Keller: In terms of you personally, are doing this on a purely trade basis—your time for their allowing you to mention SMW? Or are you getting some decent money out of this?

Cornette: I got paid for it, but to tell you the truth, I didn't know what I was getting paid until I got out there, either. I didn't ask because I'm not doing it for the money. I'm doing it because I think it will help Smoky Mountain Wrestling and

that's the bottom line of the whole thing. As long as I can get some exposure and publicity and credibility with a wider audience for Smoky Mountain Wrestling, then—I'm not going to get on an airplane for 75 dollars, there's a limit to aggravation—but, I don't expect to get rich. It's pretty obvious from the past that I don't care about it.

Keller: Was money at all a factor, even if not for you personally to go buy a sports car or another large-screen TV, but for you personally to be able to reinvest it in the company or be able to afford that extra piece of talent that you can afford now?

Cornette: I don't think I'm going to earn enough money that I can go out and buy us a brand new ring truck or anything right off the bat. It's more the intangible value than them saying, "Hey, here's \$5,000." If you're going to bring somebody new in for \$5,000, that's not going to last long.

Keller: All humility aside, do you believe you will be able to get Yokozuna over, and thus Lex Luger over, to a degree that is very valuable to the WWF?

Cornette: I had very little notice and only three weeks of TV. I mean, I'm not saying the guy ain't over and that I'm going to make a big difference. I just did the best job I could do with the time I had and the things I had to say.

Keller: Is it personally fulfilling for you to be in what is perceived to be the major promotion on well-produced television shows that are seen everywhere?

Cornette: I think it was a bigger kick for me that the people in Utica, New York remembered me after three years. I figured I was going to go out there and hear crickets chirping because nobody's going to know who I am. In Plattsburg, New York, I'm 62 miles south of Montreal, Canada and yet they knew who I was. It was a kick because they remembered who I was.

Keller: In addition to the deal helping SMW, did the additional exposure play a factor in you deciding to accept the agreement? Did you think this might also be some fun?

Cornette: I'll tell you what. Their TV tapings, they're slick and well-produced, but they definitely ain't fun because you're working your ass off. I would a whole lot rather be at the Jefferson County Fair ten miles from my house and wrestle the turtle than go up and do that for fun. I really don't think... If I had wanted to before now, just for ego gratification or whatever, I would have called them. Anybody who knows me well enough, everybody has that button that makes them want 100,000 dollars or six nude women in your room—well, I've gotta have something for Smoky Mountain Wrestling and then you've got me.

I know everybody's saying, "Awe, bullsh—, bullsh—, he wants to get out there on that TV and

I'm not doing it for the money. I'm doing it because I think it will help Smoky Mountain Wrestling and that's the bottom line of the whole thing. (I'll work with the WWF as) long as I can get some exposure and publicity and credibility with a wider audience for Smoky Mountain.

do interviews and all that." Well, I do interviews on TV every week and I like my TV a whole lot more than I like anybody else's. That's not the kick. It was a thrill for me to be sitting next to Vince McMahon and Bobby Heenan when they're both talking about Smoky Mountain Wrestling. And Bobby Heenan, in the middle of the ring, calling me the greatest manager in wrestling. I told him beforehand, "The cameraman better shoot me from the waist up or I'm going to get you kicked off the air when Bobby says those words." Here's a guy I started watching—he was on the fourth TV show I ever watched in my life. And I think he is the greatest.

Keller: So let me get this straight. One of your demands to go to the WWF was to be called the greatest manager in wrestling by Bobby Heenan. Right?

Cornette: No (laughs). It was a heck of a kick for me. I got a thrill out of that. I got a thrill out of hearing these two guys who have—good, bad, or indifferent—done a lot of stuff in the wrestling business talking about Smoky Mountain Wrestling on a national TV show.

Keller: Had you had much of any relations with Bobby Heenan in the past?

Cornette: We never worked in the same place. I ran into him a couple of times at the NATPE convention in New Orleans. I've seen him at airports, maybe less than even once a year we'd run into each other over the past several years and we'd talk. He's always been super-nice to me.

Keller: Was it any different this time given that you two were now working together? Did you hang out together outside of the tapings? Given both of your histories in the business, you two appearing on camera together was a pretty big deal.

Cornette: We sat and talked on the stage for a while the first night. He was only there the first night. We sat and talked for a while and told some stories and just bullsh—ed around, but

there's not a lot of times at their TVs that you're just sitting around doing nothing. With 56 guys in the dressing room, it's not like you've got a lot of time to play cards.

Keller: Do you guys share a lot in common outside of the wrestling business?

Cornette: I don't know him well enough to say if we have anything personally in common other than we like the wrestling business and we like to bullsh— and tell stories.

Keller: Am I correct in reporting that in SMW, only Sandy Scott and Tim Horner knew that you were going to the WWF other than the Bodies themselves?

Cornette: Yes. They knew before it was finalized. Nobody else. About the same time I told the Bodies.

Keller: Were there behind-the-scenes debates about whether this was the right thing to do? With Horner's past with the WWF and the lawsuit he filed against them a while back, was he more against this than others?

Cornette: He don't like them to be sure. He's had some bad experiences, but it wasn't a case of "Tim, I'm going up there." It was, "Tim, they're going to plug Smoky Mountain Wrestling, so as far as I'm concerned, there ain't no debate on that." That's the thing, and I want to make this clear, the WWF—and I told Vince McMahon this—the WWF is not my style of wrestling. I hate to use the word, "old school," but I'm old style wrestling. The WWF is not my personal style of wrestling. But I have said all along, and you can go back to any interview, at least the sh—they do, they do in the right way. It makes sense what they do, even if it's crazy or whatever. Personally, it's not my thing and I've knocked them before. If Vince McMahon thought I could do enough for their business to bypass the knocks that I've given to what they do and still ask me to come up there because it's business, then I can overcome my personal preferences because of trying to think about my business.

Keller: Were Horner and Scott mad about this or did they say, "Whatever is good for Smoky Mountain is good for us?"

Cornette: I think there was more, "Are you sure they're going to do this?" I told them ahead of time that if they do what they say they're going to do or change it ahead of time, everything's fine. If they try to change something in the middle of what we're doing, I'll be hot.

Keller: Why did you not tell SMW employees about the WWF appearances the night before you left in Welch, West Virginia?

Cornette: Here's the way I look at it. Number one, one of the things the WWF asked me was not to tell anybody until we got there. So I gave them my word I wouldn't tell anybody.

I think it also will be an incentive for guys to work here because they know that the WWF will be keeping up with what we are doing and that at least there's an open conversation. If somebody is finished here or comes here and has the potential to go up there, it might be easier for them. This is all in the early stages. That's a plus for all concerned.

Secondly, I think all these guys I consider my friends and I hope all of them are and they know me well enough to know that if something was going to happen where they didn't have a job next week, that I would've told them. Thirdly, I think they also know me well enough to know that anything I do at this point will have some benefit for this company involved in it. I'm sorry if anybody got worried or freaked out or upset, but I think that would be attributed more to paranoia than anything else because if something was going to happen where we were just going away, then I would tell these guys and I would tell them as soon as I knew, because I would owe them that and I would do the best to let them know what was happening and why.

I looked at it like nothing was going to change in this territory (SMW) except that it may be a plus in four to six weeks, then I didn't look at it like it was a drastic part of anybody's life where they needed to know right away. I didn't think that anybody would flip.

Keller: Realistically, looking back now, you know what the reaction was because of the sheer shock of you doing something you swore you would never do—work for the WWF—so would you not agree to not tell your wrestlers again?

Cornette: All of the guys have my phone number—and with the exception of Brian Hildebrand who I was f—in' with because I told Kelly to tell him where we were Sunday night and tell him what the deal was—Sunday or Monday after it took place. None of our wrestlers have called me to ask a thing about it through tonight at 1 o'clock in the morning or whatever, I haven't had one message. Brian Lee called to ask directions to the town tomorrow. They don't know about it. They haven't even heard about it. Unless they're hooked up to a gossip line, which most of our guys ain't, they don't even know.

Tomorrow night when I get there, I will fill everybody in. Tony Anthony lives right here in town and he knows. Candido knows. I talked to Bob Armstrong last night and he hadn't heard.

Keller: In retrospect, would it have been better to tell everybody the day before?

Cornette: I guess it's just my blind spot that I never thought anybody would think anything other than that it was something I was doing as a plus for Smoky Mountain Wrestling. I never even thought of it. I was even getting a kick out of it thinking about the guys' reactions when they did hear about it. It never entered my mind that it would be a negative and really and truthfully, with all of our guys, with the exception of Brian Hildebrand who got hot at me because I didn't tell him, I haven't heard anything from any of the guys that they're hot or even knew about it. It's not something they needed to know immediately because it's not going to be a benefit to us for a few weeks or however long. And nothing we do is going to change. We just might sell a few extra tickets for it. Nothing we do is going to change in any way unless we decide to change things for the better.

Keller: In a "Torch Talk," conducted Aug. 13, 1992, you talked about a possible working agreement with a major promotion. You said, "If you have a regional group and you work with one of the big groups and they send you one of their stars and if their stars aren't on your next card, people might say, let's wait until the next time everybody is on the card. Vice-versa, when you send them your guys, are they going to let your guys beat their guys? Unless it is promoted as an equal situation, somebody will end up looking minor league and you don't need that." Do you feel comfortable that the relationship between SMW and the WWF is equal and you will not look minor league?

Cornette: I think so. Look, I'm managing their World Champion. Even if he is going to get his ass kicked, and I don't even know what they're going to do. If it was me, I would put the thing on Luger because he's going to look like a plate full of piss if he doesn't win it. We are not the Smoky Mountain tag team champions now. We are going out there saying we are the greatest tag team in Smoky Mountain Wrestling and we are challenging for the WWF tag team titles. No disgrace getting beat by the world tag team champions. By the same token, if they send guys down here, if they send them onto every card, then it's not special anymore. I would love to get the Steiners to come down and work with the Bodies in October, or then maybe another guy for the Thanksgiving shows. The people in Everts, Ky. will never see the WWF guys. Maybe every two shows there's somebody in Knoxville or Johnson City, our major cities, and maybe every four shows there will be somebody showing up in Barbourville, Ky., which is a monthly town for us. You have to keep it special.

Keller: But if it's special one month, do you believe people will wait a few months until it's "special" again when the WWF guys return?

Cornette: In Memphis, they were having the "WWF star of the week" for a while, and you burn out the stars pretty quick that way. With monthly shows and not having somebody every time, it's more rare. One time you've got the tag champions, another time a tag team, another time a singles heel, another time a singles babyface.

Keller: Clarify for me if what you say today contradicts what you said one year ago.

Cornette: What I was talking about was the Memphis situation with somebody on every show. We've got Bossman on the big shows in August, but that's "Fire on the Mountain" and the big show in Knoxville. You need to get the people something extra. In September, you might back off unless there is something that can only take place then and never take place again. I wouldn't want to overdo it. An example of what I'm talking about is Georgia Championship Wrestling back in the '70s and early-'80s. They had their own crew, their own stars, and their own territory, but when the Omni ran around, boy, you had the world champion, or somebody from Florida or somebody from St. Louis who was hot over there. It made the Omni event more special. They didn't do that every time there either and it always worked. People saw the Omni in Georgia as the place to go to see professional wrestling.

Keller: So you see what you're saying as a clarification of what you said a year ago, not a contradiction?

Cornette: This was not an option a year ago. I think I may have also said when talking about it, when you bring outside talent in, you can do it limited. Look, we brought Arn Anderson in because it fit the program, made sense, and it was something we could only do then, so we did it.

Keller: This is an insider, booking type question, but do you run the risk of the fan perception eventually catching on that when a big name wrestler comes in who is currently wrestling somewhere else that the wrestlers are only in temporarily and they will learn that the blowoff is coming quickly? Do you fear that you will train people to not expect long-running feuds with rematches when bigger name wrestlers are involved and as a result, they won't get emotionally involved when the big names are in town?

Cornette: If you weren't ever getting any name talent that came in and stayed, then you would. When Kevin Sullivan debuted on TV, he stayed for six months.

Keller: But Kevin Sullivan wasn't currently wrestling for another promotion. But The Steiners, fans will know, can't work for SMW full time and eventually a pattern could form that fans would catch on to.

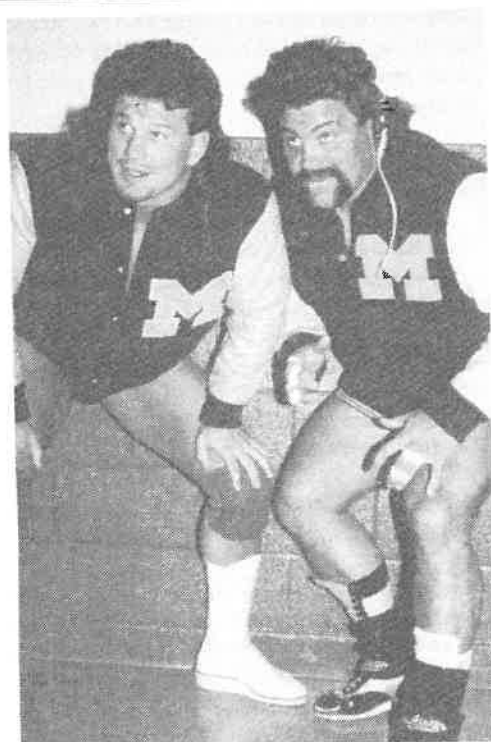
Cornette: Since the WWF doesn't run

Knoxville, if the people want to see the Steiners or Bossman, they better come that night because they know they aren't going to come back. If Bret Hart comes in and faces Joe Cazana, the people go, "Who gives a sh—?" But if you've got a hot heel who needs his head handed to him and boy, he's gone through everybody and here comes "Hitman" Bret Hart and he's going to kick his ass, then people might say, "We're going to go see that." Of course, you have to make the guy look good because he is a name and you don't want to offend him, but at the same time you don't want to destroy the heel that you put heat on who is a regular part of the territory. You just have a special match and get out of it some kind of way.

Keller: If you agree that a pattern of big names coming in for one match only could lead to predictability and the need for cheap finishes that protect both parties, wouldn't it be better to stick with your own stars who can be back for that traditional rematch and clean finishes?

Cornette: Who's to say you can't use that outside star to help build your own guy? Let's say The Heavenly Bodies are the tag team champions and the Steiners come in to challenge them. Let's say you do a DQ or a screw job, or let's say the Steiners do a job—it depends on who it is and what kind of situation it is. Then your guys have more credibility because you can say, "Hey, these big stars came into our back yard and couldn't handle it. If you're creative, and hopefully we are, you can do a variety of different things. Let's say they've got a heel up there who is just a hot son of a bitch, an ass-kicker, and you've got a heel up here who has run through everybody and somebody needs to kick his ass, you bring that heel in to go against your heel. Now that heel gets cheered. Now that heel gets cheered, but he doesn't have to be out of character. And they have a heck of a match and once again you get out of it some kind of way. Let's say that you have a babyface, Tracy Smothers, and he's champion and he's really cooking and he needs a shot at the Intercontinental Title or the world title. I'm just saying in a perfect world, these are things that could go on. Then he finally gets his chance, just like the old travelling world champion used to do. The champion comes in, you only see him once a year, the local hometown boy gets his shot, and everybody is behind him, and of course he comes up short. But he comes up short in a way that doesn't hurt him. There's 20 million things you can do other than just bringing the star of the week in and having a match.

Keller: Fair enough. Now, here's another quote from the same "Torch Talk." One year ago you said, "And besides that, to my mind, if you associate with a group that has proven to be phony, which the WWF certainly is, and WCW for the past four years has had the



Scott & Rick Steiner

Wade Keller

reputation of being, then why isn't your wrestling phony, too?"

Cornette: Good point. The only answer I've got to it is, number one, a year later, we've been in business over a year and a half, I think at least we've got some credibility where we can do something like that and people don't think that automatically. This is another thing they didn't do in Memphis: We're busting in there and basically saying, "You guys ain't sh—, we are." On my TV, I'm going to be saying the very same thing. "We're going around challenging these so-called champions who think they're hot because we're from East Tennessee and by-god we hit each other over the head with chairs here. And, to be honest with ya', (now that it's) a year later, I would like to do something to spark the houses and if this will help and it's open to us, maybe it will make me eat my words because it will do us a lot of business.

Keller: So circumstances have changed, thus your change in stance?

Cornette: That's the way I felt at that point in time. I have to say, there's still something to it, but I tell you what, WCW has lowered the standards so far that the WWF almost looks like a Shakespearian tragedy.

Keller: Did you say what you said a year ago about them being phony because you didn't think there was a chance in hell that you would want to or had a chance to work with them? Or did you say that because you believed it and still do today, but today you are willing to sacrifice a little bit of your principles for something that may work?

Cornette: I believed it and I'm willing to

sacrifice some of my principles for something that may work. We thought the wrestling business last year was the worst it could get. And it's worse now. You've got to try something different. It's like all of those Madison Avenue ad campaigns; when something ain't selling, they say, "Let's put a naked woman on the dadgum billboard." You try sh— you haven't tried because if the stuff you tried didn't work, you've got to try something else. Also, at that time, I don't think I thought this would ever be possible to do and I don't think the WWF probably thought they would do it.

Keller: Is there a style of promoting that the WWF could have been doing that would have caused you to not form this relationship?

Cornette: Let's footnote this. They're doing a lot of things this year that they would have said a year ago, "Naw."

Keller: Is that a convenient reason you can use as an afterthought or is that something that really went into it ahead of time? Did you think the WWF had shifted closer to your philosophy?

Cornette: I think the styles between the two promotions are still pretty different. I tell you what, I watched that dadgum "King of the Ring" pay-per-view and that was a good show. It was a good show. In the immortal words of Ole Anderson, "Cornette, I always thought you were a dumbsh—, but so many other dumbsh—s have come along that are dumber than you are that it's

moved you up the ladder without you doing anything."

Keller: Given all of what has been said, does the term "hypocrite" still apply to you? Maybe you're a "good hypocrite?"

Cornette: (laughs) All I say is, I'm not doing it because I want to do it. I'm not saying I don't want to do it. I'm just saying I'm not doing it for myself, I'm doing it to try to sell some tickets for Smoky Mountain Wrestling and get us just a little attention and a little perception to the people that, "Hey, these guys are moving all over the world. These guys are stars everywhere and maybe we should come if we haven't been." So if people have to knock me for trying to do something for that, then that's cool. They have to do it.

Keller: So you're a hypocrite, but with damn good reason?

Cornette: That's right. I'm a hypocrite with a cause. Here's the thing. I'm not doing anything different for them than what we do on our TV for them. It's the Heavenly Bodies and it's Jim Cornette, and we work the same, we act the same, we talk the same. With me with Yokozuna, I'm doing the same thing that I always do. Whenever I do something, I do the best I can with it. I'm not trying to hold back. I'm not trying to change my style. Nobody's telling me what to say. Obviously, I'm following the angle as it's going. I'm not going out there talking about soup when they want me to talk about nuts. Nobody's sticking a piece of paper in front of me and saying, "Okay, memorize it."

Keller: Do you fear you will lose credibility if you walk out of SummerSlam having managed a world champion, Yokozuna, who walked out of the ring without the belt, and having managed the former SMW tag champs, The Heavenly Bodies, who said they were the best in the world who lost to the Steiners in two high-profile matches?

Cornette: Go back over the period of time from Starrcade '85 until the time I left WCW and count how many matches the Midnight Express won on a pay-per-view or Clash. Then tell me that you cannot lose a match and still keep your heat and your notoriety.

Keller: So that's not a concern for you?

Cornette: No. Whether I win or lose, except unless it's something really ridiculous like the Cole Twins beating Eaton & Benoit, whether my guys win or lose has never been a concern to me. Only having a good match and getting the people into it and accomplishing what we do which is sell tickets. I would like to add one thing. For all of you aspiring wrestlers out there, if a world champion can't beat you without people thinking you're a disgrace, then you're not doing your job.

Keller: That argument goes back to Michael

Jordan's team losing twenty or thirty games a year, yet his team is still considered one of the better teams ever.

Cornette: Exactly.

Keller: In the Torch's cover story, one person who has been involved in the business and knows Heenan said, "Any problems Heenan causes with you will be covert. Heenan's a real snake." Have you gotten any sense through inside politics indicating Heenan doesn't want you in the WWF?

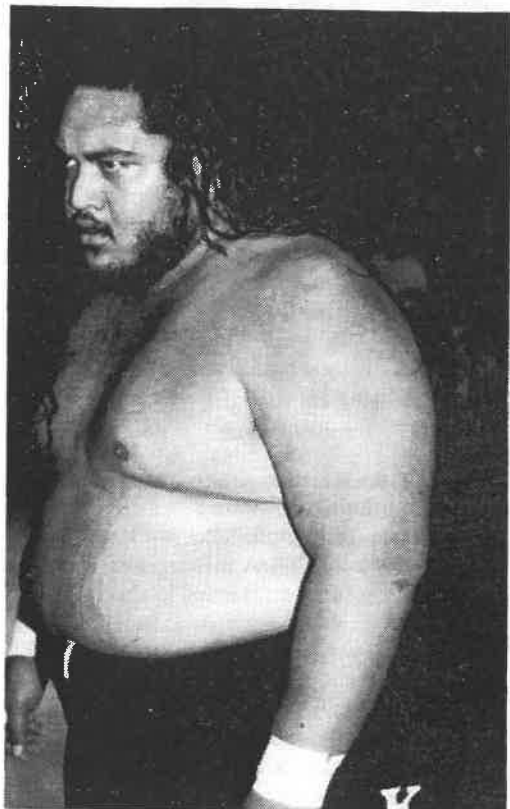
Cornette: I don't know why he wouldn't because he's a manager. I don't see any problem with it or any reason he shouldn't because he's a commentator and he does his shows, I'm a manager, I do my stuff. I get the sense that Bobby does what's best for the company and what's best for selling tickets. Let's say anybody goes and undermines me and sabotages me, the ultimate thing is if Vince McMahon wants me to be there, he's going to prevent people from doing that. If he doesn't prevent people from doing that, that must mean he doesn't want me too good, so I'll just go home. You can only screw somebody when somebody is desperate to be somewhere. I don't need the aggravation. I've got plenty of it right here at home. As long as everything's cool, I'll do my best for them. They know that, also. Jim Ross knows that. Everybody who has worked with me knows that I will dig in and drill through concrete to get something accomplished if I'm just told what's happening for a shoot. If somebody bullsh—s me around, then I get pissed and say screw it.

Wade Keller: Are you spreading yourself too thin by delegating some of your time to the WWF?

Jim Cornette: It's just a couple dates here and there. This was unusual being there three days in a row and that was because it was with the Bodies and we're coming up on a pay-per-view. I told them one thing I don't have is a lot of time. They said that wasn't going to be a problem. Maybe I'll have to drop off writing six press releases or something, but I'll have to decide what the most important things are and get them done and have somebody else do whatever else.

Keller: Let's go back a little about not telling the SMW wrestlers you were going to the WWF. The night you debuted in the WWF, you had time to call Dave Meltzer to tell him what happened, yet you didn't call any of your own employees who were sure to hear about this through the grapevine and wonder what was happening. In retrospect, was that a mistake?

Cornette: The reason I called Dave Meltzer was, I figured if we had kept this secret, if it really was a secret, he wouldn't know about it. If anybody would know about it, he would. As a matter of fact, when I was working for WCW, he used to know the contracts they were going to offer us before they offered them to us. I would call him to find out if I still had a job. So I figured,



Yokozuna

Wade Keller

okay, I'm going to find out if it's a secret, I'm going to call Meltzer and if he says, "Hey, how was the taping?" I'll know it wasn't a secret. If he says, "Hey, anything going on?" I'll know we did it. That was the acid test.

Keller: Do you think employees might wonder why you had time to call the press, but not them?

Cornette: I didn't look at it as calling the press. I looked at it as calling the one guy who was going to know, if anybody did, what was happening. He didn't, so I said, "Damn, we did a good job."

Keller: If eventually the booking position in the WWF opens up, is that something you would be interested in if an offer were made?

Cornette: I think we're jumping the gun a little bit here... But now you're talking about a conflict of time. There's no way I'd do both and you know which one I'd pick. I'd be here (in SMW). Truthfully, I watch their stuff and I don't know how to do that stuff, the style they like to do. That's not my thing. If I sat down and studied and applied myself, I could figure out something about it. I'm not convinced I could do what they do as well as they do it. I know I can do the sh—we do good. The brain surgeon doesn't work on the heart and lower intestines.

Keller: You've said in the past that if Smoky Mountain doesn't succeed, you're through with the wrestling business because the business as you know it is over. You have no clue what you'll do, but it will probably be somewhere in a straight-jacket. Now, you've just given an answer to the WWF question that differed from that previous view, saying you wouldn't consider a WWF job because their booking style is different than yours.

Cornette: I didn't mean to give you that impression. I look at this like: hey, what's the big deal? I went out and did promos on their TV like I do on my TV every week and everybody's clapping and everything and I don't think it's that much because it's sh—I do all the time. I don't think saliva is running down their mouth that they'd want me to do that, anyway. I don't see it happening. I'm flattered that people think that, but that's way premature. I went up and did three TVs and all of a sudden I'm the head booker and Vince and I are having lunch. I think that's way premature.

Keller: Is this fair to say: As long as you can sustain a living with Smoky Mountain Wrestling, you will stay there no matter what the offer, even if they gave you complete creative control?

Cornette: If they said you can do anything you want to with our promotion including promoting it like Smoky Mountain, I'd say (laughs), "Here's what we'll do. We'll keep running Smoky Mountain Wrestling down here, send you a tape once a week, and send them to the stations. You can run Madison Square Garden, I'll be at

the Jefferson County Fair." No, I'm joking. Now people will take that seriously. Now they'll say, "Cornette is demanding the WWF run Smoky Mountain Wrestling all across the country!" As long as SMW is here, and I hope it's here for many, many years, this is my first and foremost priority and anything outside of it that I do will be in some way tied in to helping it succeed better.

Keller: Was there something in your deal with the WWF where your remuneration is more than just an appearance fee? Is there also an additional fee that is reinvested into SMW?

Cornette: No.

Keller: Is it accurate that something like that happened when you worked for WCW last year as Stan Lane said in the cover story on your WWF entrance?

Cornette: No, it's not accurate. They didn't pay me and I put my money back into Smoky Mountain Wrestling. They paid me a booking fee for the video tape we sent and for us coming up for the angle and booking our talent out, which was common occurrence in the old days going right back to the NWA Champion. Then, the NWA got a booking fee off of the house for arranging the appearance. So we got a booking fee, so I myself made diddly squat if you want to know the truth about it. That's where Stan and I also did not see eye-to-eye. Stan refused to believe I would do the sh—that I do for no money personally, just to help the company. He thought, "He's making some money somewhere. Look at that new watch he's got." Well, I had a new \$49 watch from Service Merchandise, right? Stan is so centered on money or a payoff or whatever, that he couldn't ever believe I was doing this stuff for the company. That's because he wouldn't. That's also where we couldn't see eye-to-eye. If you want to know the truth, I didn't earn diddly for SuperBrawl. I used to make more working for Joel Goodhart than I made working at SuperBrawl as far as money that went into my bank account versus the company's.

Keller: Had you ever had much contact with Vince McMahon until the last six weeks?

Cornette: Dennis (Condrey), Bobby (Eaton), and I went up in '86 and talked to him. I had spoken to him several times on the telephone but not in the last five years. Once again, he couldn't have been nicer to us. I've got to say that.

Keller: Compare how you were treated in the WWF to your recent visit to WCW?

Cornette: With WCW, it was totally different because Bill Watts and I got along fine. He told me his opinions on anything and everything that was going on and I mean he was entirely open and asked me what I thought and he knew I was being honest with him. The relationship with Bill Watts couldn't have been better. But everybody else, except for a ring announcer or something, would have been happier to see the IRS than see

us. Everybody was worried about their spot. But when Vince McMahon wants you to come up there and Vince McMahon wants to make you feel welcome, everybody from soup to nuts is nice to you. That shows the guy is the head of his company. If Vince wants it, Vince gets it.

Keller: Did you learn anything from being around the WWF TV tapings?

Cornette: Yeah, that with another \$30,000 to spend on every TV taping, I could really (have fun). It's a major production. It's organized chaos because you can never have a calm orderly TV taping. There's no such thing. Whereas WCW's is chaos, WWF's is organized chaos. There's always something going on and people are running around like chickens with their heads cut off, trying to get all the things done, but there's somebody at every turn to tell them exactly what needs to be done. I believe if I sat around and observed more, I would pick up a few things. And when I sit down and think about it, I probably did anyway. But a lot of the stuff would require a whole lot more of a major production than we will conceivably ever do.

Keller: Can you give an example of what you learned?

Cornette: Basically everybody stays on top of what they have to do. Everybody is just really good at what they do. I'm talking about the crew. I sat and watched the director and he was cutting sh—on the fly, punching stuff up that I always thought they posted (post-produced) because it just couldn't be done that good live. I was sitting there watching the monitor and he was doing it. Everybody is just good at what they do.

Keller: Do you know if your relationship with the WWF affects Jerry Jarrett's relationship with the WWF?

Cornette: I wouldn't imagine so. Lawler was there and he was happy. I didn't speak to him at length about anything. We just bullsh—ed and joked around a little bit because I hadn't seen him in a while. To me the biggest thing that would affect his relationship with Vince is that he's been going in there talking to Atlanta. But I don't know anything about it. If I were Vince, I'd be going, "Wait a minute."

Keller: What is the status of you applying for an NWA promoting license?

Cornette: Terry Funk called me last year and was going to the NWA meeting and wanted a letter announcing our intention to apply, which I sent to him. We haven't done it yet because, really there would have been no plus or no big deal for us until now. Now Flair's the NWA Champion, but if (WCW) gets their wish, he'll drop it by the time you'll ever get a date on him. If he's not the NWA champion, I don't particularly think we need the NWA champion.

Keller: Could you be a member of the NWA and have a working relationship with the

WWF? In this day and age would there be anything to prevent that?

Cornette: As long as we fulfill our part of any bargain we make with anybody, I guess we can do anything we all god damn well want to. (Vince) didn't buy our company. He just asked a few of our people to appear there and opened up the door.

Keller: If you were to work with the WWF and be an influential member of the NWA, conceivably you might be able to schedule a Luger vs. Flair match and book Luger to win the NWA belt while he is the WWF champion, right?

Cornette: Well, only if I was the only member of the NWA because everybody else would vote against it. When you talk about hypothetical situations, anything can happen, but staying in the realm of reality...

Keller: I just threw that in for fun.

Cornette: Yeah, but everybody's taking this and running with it.

Keller: Of course they are. If you had been flippant about it early on and not kept it secret, it wouldn't have seemed so mysterious. Instead, you opened up the door to speculation. By keeping it secret until the last second, it left the possibility open in people's eyes that this big secret could include a lot more than you just shooting a couple of promos for the WWF.

Cornette: Well, like I said, that is what they asked me to do and I said okay. If I tell somebody I'm going to do something, I'll do it.

Keller: But I doubt you did everything they asked of you and blindly said, "Yes, no problem." You could have said, "No, let me tell my guys ahead of time."

Cornette: Once again, I didn't think it would be the big major schmoz that it's become. I figured it would be one of those deals where the people sitting at home come up off the couch, "Look at that! God damn, there he is. Ha ha ha." My deal in Atlanta was a bigger deal than anything that we did on the WWF taping, but nobody went nuts. When you think about it, WCW is a whole lot more screwed up company than the WWF is, but nobody went out of their minds that we came on there, talked about Smoky Mountain Wrestling, and did an angle.

Keller: Here is a quote from Paul E. Dangerously: "I'm critical of bookers who book themselves. It killed Rhodes, it makes you unobjective and opens you up for criticism. Valid or not, the criticism is a distraction. Is Cornette a mark for national exposure? He's in every angle in SMW, so that tells me he likes the exposure." Any comments on that?

Cornette: Well, let's see (laughs). Paul E. doesn't like exposure? I'll have to pull out that picture of him and the Barbi Twins that I clipped out of the *New York Post*.

Keller: Another guy from SMW said a little Dustyitis might be hitting Cornette because he's headlined all but three or four SMW events.

Cornette: That was somebody from here? I'd love to know who that is so I can clip their paycheck a little bit.

Keller: For the right amount of money I'll tell you who it is.

Cornette: How much is the right amount? Anyway, to Paul E. Paul was a booker, Paul booked himself. You've got to remember, number one, I know I'll always be here. I don't have to worry about me holding me up, asking for money. If I break my leg, I'll drag myself out there. I know I'm going to make every show and I'm going to make every TV and I'm going to be there all the way through, so naturally, a lot of the heat should go on me because I can depend on me. I'm not going to wake up one morning and go, "Cornette, you !#@\$, I'm through!" Secondly, the heat in large part always goes on the manager, anyway. I happen to be the manager. I don't think I have—this is to Paul E. and to the other guy—I don't believe I have Dustyitis. Dusty (Rhodes) pushed himself when he clearly had a number of wrestlers in the territory who were better than he was, that had passed him, and time had caught up with him; he wasn't able to do the job like he was able to at one time. Other guys were and he still beat them like drums. Name me the manager who can out-perform me? Name me the wrestler who is available who can out-talk me? Name me the guy I can afford who has had more national TV exposure than I have. Basically, I'm looking at me as one of the intangible assets that I've got here in SMW—that is, to use myself.

Keller: And, heck, you haven't given yourself the strap yet. You're not SMW Champion. Would that concern you if you booked yourself as the champion?

Cornette: Yes, that would concern me (laughs). And whenever I put myself in the ring, which is to try to draw an extra 50 people, I've won one match since Smoky Mountain Wrestling has been in existence. I beat Bob Armstrong in that six-man in Knoxville to set up next month where it's me and him, one on one, so he can get his revenge. If I couldn't do the job and still push myself relentlessly, then I'm an egotistical nut. If I think I can get it done and do as good as anybody else available to me, then I look at it as using an asset I have available to me that doesn't cost me any money. My guys, the Bodies, I beat them like drums on the spot shows where we ain't coming back. On the big shows, they go over or get some heat until after the blow off and then they get their asses kicked, just like any other heels. If I wanted to be Mr. Glory, as soon as I brought Jimmy in, we would have beat the Rock & Roll and got the belts back, but it was time for the Rock & Roll to do something else

Paul was a booker, Paul booked himself. You've got to remember, number one, I know I'll always be here. I don't have to worry about me holding me up, asking for money. If I break my leg, I'll drag myself out there. I know I'm going to make every show and I'm going to make every TV and I'm going to be there all the way through, so naturally, a lot of the heat should go on me because I can depend on me. I'm not going to wake up one morning and go, "Cornette, you !#@\$, I'm through!"

and be fresh.

Wade Keller: Explain the rationale of booking you in the main event against the retired Bob Armstrong?

Jim Cornette: Bob Armstrong in a singles match coming back in the ring beating up Dirty White Boy or Brian Lee, now that he's a heel, sorry but I don't see a lot of money there. Since me and Bob Armstrong as manager and commissioner have gone around and 'round for a year on TV and that underlying tension has throbbed all during that time, it was only natural that when he gets back in the ring, just the same as Bill Watts did me, that I be the focal point of being the guy he was going after.

Look at the other side. Look at Bob Armstrong. He's the most over babyface we've got. Now examine this. Why? He's 53 years old or whatever. He's not going to be the top babyface for three years. But it's only natural that when you bring a guy back like that, number one, he's head and shoulders above everyone else when it comes to promos. I mean, I don't think anybody will dispute that. Secondly, he's a legend and people have believed in him for 15 or 20 years. He's not somebody you have to get over like saying, "This guy's great! This guy's great!" They know he's great. They've seen him time in and time out all of those years prove that he's a top guy in this territory. Thirdly, he's not broke down. He doesn't come out like Frank

Hickey or like Roughhouse Fargo toward the end or anybody else who's been dredged up. Jesus, at the old-timers pay-per-view—"The Legends Reunion"—Bob Armstrong looks better than half of the guys who are on the payroll now that work the show. To me, it would only be bullsh— if he didn't talk better, didn't look better, and wasn't over better and the people didn't think he could kick everybody's ass. But since he can, does, they do, and etcetera, then you use that to try to sell some tickets. Sure enough, Bob Armstrong was the only name added to the July show in Knoxville and it was up \$3,000 from the June show. Johnson City was up \$2,000. Barbourville was up almost \$1,000.

I'm not saying Bob's going to draw for six months, but he doesn't have to. That was never the design to begin with. Meanwhile, it gives us the chance to set up a few things underneath and do some different stuff while he is on his path for revenge and then later on getting back out of the ring. K.C. (O'Connor) asked me, "Why isn't the title match the top match?" Because, how does Brian Lee, who's just turned, with a manager—who is going to be f—in' tremendous and is going to have more heat than I do when given time—against Tracy Smothers—who is a tremendous babyface and is over exceptionally well over everybody but Bob Armstrong for the reasons I've named and just because Bob is new, new again—how do they follow a six-man tag with a legend kicking the sh— out of this whimpy manager and people running in with baseball bats. Why would you put them in a handicapped position like that? If you have the title match on before the six-man tag, then they tear the house down and they wrestle and they take bumps and they do all that stuff and the people love that match, then you've got six guys in the ring and the main focus is whether Bob Armstrong is going to get his hands around my neck and the baseball bats come in and 18 guys run in and it closes the show on a wild note. It's the flow of the show I look at. I hate to have a singles match follow a tag or a six-man because it puts them at an extra disadvantage at the beginning, two guys following six or four. If it's Ric Flair in a world title match, you don't have a problem.

I just try to look at the flow because everybody on our shows works their asses off. Every match, I hope, means something. And every match is different. So just kind of flow it where the night ends with a bang.

Also, there's a lot of difference between a babyface booker and a heel booker. If that babyface booker pounds the piss out of the daggum heels at every opportunity, then the heels don't have any heat and the babyfaces get all the glory and pretty soon you ain't drawing any money. I make myself the butt of sh— just as often as I get heat. You've got to have balance.

Here's another thing. In Morristown, Tim

Homer and Tracy Smothers had a tremendous match. We had Brian Lee with a run-in and Tammy with a glove and everything. But, we put the tag match on last with The Bodies and The Armstrongs because Bob was back for the first time in the corner and I was in the corner. We knew we were going to end up with a major schmoz with Steve Armstrong tied to the ropes and Bob getting beaten up with the racket and powder in the ring and the Rock & Roll coming out to make the save to set up the following month's show. So even though Tim and Tracy that night was the match that probably drew the most money of the matches we had, to put that on last after that sh—, especially it being a babyface match, no matter how hard they worked, they would have been at a disadvantage. Some people will say, "Well, why not have the other finishes where the guys are running in with the baseball bat and all that?" Because it doesn't fit. For Tracy and Tim to suddenly erupt into an eight-man all out war, it doesn't make any sense.

Keller: Are there any points not addressed concerning your relationship with the WWF that you would like to cover?

Cornette: Number one, as far as the relationship with Smoky Mountain Wrestling, we're not changing nothing we do, we're not changing any of the ways we do things. We're just trying to get some exposure and see if this helps us sell some tickets. On the WWF side, everybody was as nice as they could be. Everything was presented as it would be. If it ever ceases to be that way for whatever reason, I'll have to look at what I'm doing again, but until then I see no reason why I shouldn't continue doing whatever I have the time and ability to do to help them out if they're helping us out.

On a personal thing, I've knocked Vince McMahon's style of doing things in the past, obviously. But if he put that aside—I mean, I don't like it when people knock my sh—s— because he thought I could help his company make money, why should I not be business enough to put my feelings aside to see if I can help his company make money. The one thing about it is, regardless of what I'm doing, I'm going to be Jim Cornette and I'm going to carry the daggum tennis racket and I'm going to talk the same way I always talk and I will also work as hard as I do for our stuff here to help them because they're helping us.

Keller: What do you think about the state of the wrestling business? Is this doomsday? Have your thoughts changed much since your last "Torch Talk" one year ago? Have you seen any positive changes?

Cornette: No. Everything is the sh—. It's worse than ever. I mean, I never dreamed WCW could get this bad. I'm not even going to go off on the Bill Watts thing again, because, you know,

nobody, nobody, nobody can run that company now. It's just hopeless. It's just embarrassing. It's just going to get worse until eventually it dies. Hopefully it will be soon because I think it will make Vince, Smoky Mountain, Jerry Jarrett and anybody else involved in the business money if they're out of the way because that sh— drives people away like garlic in a vampire. I mean, look at the stuff we're doing that five years ago would have been drawing \$20,000 houses. Look at the stuff that Vince does that five years ago was drawing \$100,000 houses. They ain't coming anymore because they've been turned off to the whole thing. The WWF has turned a lot of people off, too. I've said that before and I'd be bullsh—ing if I didn't say it. For the people who are still here, maybe it will help us if they see us on there. I was saying something about a town I want to run and Jimmy (Del Rey) said, "Do they get our TV there?" I said, "It doesn't matter, we're on everybody else's, too!" (laughs). They'll know who we are wherever we go. So, that never hurt. It never hurts for them to know who you are. Now, if they know who you are and you have a chicken suit on, then that's a detriment. But we're ourselves. We're not doing anything we wouldn't do on our TV. We're just not doing stuff that we would do on our TV, because I don't think they're ready for that just yet up there. I know Vince has had the key position of being enemy of all wrestling fans for years now, but let's be realistic folks, that position has been overtaken.

Keller: By whom specifically or is it an entire group of people?

Cornette: By WCW and anybody responsible for the daggum sh— we've seen for who knows how long.

Keller: Has Vince changed at all or has he just been overtaken by someone worse?

Cornette: I don't think they're (the WWF) doing as much whacked out stuff as they used to. They don't have the man from Mars on there anymore.

Keller: They have a clown. It's well done, but Doink is still a clown. You're on the same TV show with a wrestling clown.

Cornette: Yeah, that's true. Like in Atlanta they had the caveman one time, too. Everybody better wake up and realize that Vince McMahon is not public enemy number one anymore even if only because he's doing the same thing and everybody else is doing sh— that's so much worse. Now it sounds like I'm defending Vince and I'm not. All I'm saying is, nobody was whacked out when we went to Atlanta and did an even more extensive deal than we're doing here now, yet everyone's whacked out over this. If people want the wrestling business to survive, they better band together and figure out some

way to blow up CNN Center instead of worrying about ...

Keller: You know you're going to get a call from the FBI now.

Comette: F— 'em. I'll go on record saying I'd like to shoot all those bastards just for beating Bobby with the Cole Twins.

Keller: Is your hunch that this SMW-WWF relationship will last well past SummerSlam?

Comette: Well, if SummerSlam does a 0.05, you've probably seen the last of me (on WWF TV). I mean, truth be known, I wish I had about 10 more weeks to work on this because I hate to do heart surgery with a can opener. I did the best I could. I would like it to continue because I think it will be a plus for our guys and I think it will benefit them and I think it will benefit us. Somebody else said, "What about the federal investigation? Is this a good time to be associated with the WWF?" Hey, we weren't there when all of the sh— happened. We don't have nothing to do with it. The guys at Smoky Mountain Wrestling don't take steroids because, for one thing, you can't take steroids and go into these 150 degree buildings and work 20 minutes. That would be detrimental right there. We'd have more deaths per day than they do in Cambodia. That's not applicable to us.

Keller: Ten years ago, no way would you or anyone have done an interview like this. It wouldn't have been accepted in the business. Why do you do it now and do you get heat for talking openly?

Comette: Here's one thing. I wouldn't do this on the radio. I wouldn't do this on a 900 number. It's not dropped on people's doorstep. It's not broadcast over the airwaves. It goes to a couple thousand people across the country. It's like pornography. They don't deliver it to you unsolicited, you don't hand out free samples. You have to buy it. It goes to people who are going to hear this sh— regardless of whether I say it or not, so I'd at least want them to know what the truth is. It affects our business here because people are going to want to travel to our shows if they're pissed at us. Are people going to want to buy our tapes if they're pissed at us? Are people going to start knocking us for the wrong reasons when they don't need to be?

It would disturb me if people didn't like Smoky Mountain Wrestling anymore because of something that they thought was happening and didn't know the truth about it. By the same token, it would disturb me if people were all of a sudden saying, "The WWF's a bunch of evil jerks because they've corrupted Jim Cornette" and all this other stuff. It's actually a real simple thing as the interview shows in a roundabout way, it's a simple deal. I'm trying to help them because they're trying to help us. I guess that's basically the thing.

A lot of people would knock me for doing the interview or whatever, but protecting the business now can be done for the general population—and I believe it should be—but for your readers, they're going to hear this sh— anyway. Sometimes, if you don't talk fairly openly about it, they're going to hear incorrect information and form a false opinion, so you might as well straighten the daggum sh— out. I hope that anybody in the WWF office would not get mad at me for saying this because I believe that I may be one of the only —damn people in print to actually say they were honest (laughs). All I'm saying is they were honest with us and fulfilled their part of everything with us.

Keller: Are you interested in people inside the business reading comments like this? Do you do this mainly for the readers or to communicate to others in the industry?

Comette: Both. I don't want the fans who have liked us and supported what we are doing to all of a sudden get pissed at us when there's not a reason. For the people inside the business, I want to save myself 475 phone calls having to say the same thing over and over until I'd rather puke than tell the story again. So really both.

Keller: Five years ago, interviews like this were unheard of. Now, every 14 year old with a phone and a typewriter is putting out interviews, admittedly of widely varying quality and quantity, with former national wrestlers.

Comette: And this is by far not the most revealing interview you've ever done. I mean, I feel I wouldn't do it with every 14 year old with a phone. But people read you and they read Dave (Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer*) and believe most if not all of what is printed. They need to know the right or correct sh—.

Keller: Most people don't care enough about the business and aren't secure enough with their own arguments or ability to articulate their arguments to want to go on record.

Comette: If you were to ask me, "Well, what are you going to do in two months as far as the angle with the heavyweight title?" I wouldn't tell you that. I know you wouldn't ask, either.

Keller: Not only wouldn't I ask, but I don't want to know ahead of time. The element of surprise is something I don't want taken away. I want honesty, but I don't need to know the finishes of angles. It's like interviewing an author who is writing a new novel. I wouldn't mind a hint about the plot, but I certainly prefer to read the ending not have it told to me. To know the future is to take away the fun of speculating and guessing about it. It's funny, because that is truly my attitude, yet critics of the *Torch* and *Observer* blame us for revealing outcomes ahead of time when that seldom if ever happens.

Comette: What I'm saying is that when there's been such a flap about something like this, I want

people looking at it in the right perspective so it doesn't hurt my business and so it doesn't hurt the way people look at us. Then they'll know why something was done, but we're not talking about the WWF's future angles. I don't even know what they're doing.

Keller: Do you feel you have been treated better by the *Torch* and *Observer* over the years because you have generally had open lines of communication when major stories have begged for explanation and made corrections when needed and helped with basic information that most media sources get from most other industries? Do you think you would have been covered the same way with or without that cooperation?

Comette: Back in '86 when the *Observer* was first getting circulated good, everybody looked at it, "Well, whoever Dave likes are the ones talking to him and the ones he doesn't like are the ones who won't talk to him." That's ridiculous. That's not true. That was an excuse for a lot of people. That's what people used to think and maybe some of them still think that.

Everybody's always liked the stuff that I did 90 percent of the time and hopefully I think that's just because it was good stuff. Basically, I have agreed with a great amount of the—I'm not saying the opinions—but when Dave Meltzer would say Ric Flair and Arn Anderson and whomever are great wrestlers and this guy and that guy ain't, I'd say, "That's pretty well right." Dave Meltzer to me is not Walter Cronkite. Dave Meltzer is Siskel and Ebert. He reports the news, sure, but he also adds—and I think this is what an attraction for a lot of his readers is—his opinion and commentary. He is a critic of wrestling the same as a movie critic or a drama critic or a restaurant critic is, the same as anyone who reviews performances or a business with his opinion.

You, not so much in that respect because you have columnists also, but you give the news, sure, but a great amount of the appeal to not just the fans, but to the guys (wrestlers) is that the opinions are there, too. The guys can say, "How can they —damn say that sh—!" or "He's pretty well on the ball with that." Whatever, it provokes some sort of discussion or a debate or whatever. Everybody likes to read when somebody has some great line knocking some horrible, putrid match. Everybody also likes reading when you give all the details on some scandal or other. A lot of the editors these days go overboard on this journalistic stuff. Talk about what's going on, give your opinions, have some columnists—they are entertainment just like the wrestling business is. You don't have to be the *New York Times*. *People* magazine is more like it.

Keller: Do you sense there is a respect for some of the reporting, or is the perception it is more like *People* magazine? Being around mainstream journalists, what is done in the

Torch and Observer you can argue is better because the writers are educated on what they are writing about rather than writing about one thing one day and a completely different subject the next day. And they are actually accurate a lot of the time. In some areas of the media, that is sometimes not a widespread quality.

Cornette: The guys, the wrestlers, read it to find out what is going on, who's where, and what's being said about whom. To be honest, when you open up the daggum newspaper, unless you are a journalism student or a journalist, when you read an article, you don't say, "Man, what a piece of journalism!" You go, "F—! So that bank was crooked all along!"

Keller: But it takes a good writer to write a story that you actually read all the way through and get a reaction from the article at the end. A lot of writing is so poor it takes a real commitment to get through it. If you actually read an article, that means it must have been pretty good.

Cornette: But what I'm saying is, it's like when you're average person watches a movie, they don't care who the director was. They don't notice it. Unless you're in the business, you don't notice the director was great. You just notice that Sharon Stone was hot. Everybody goes overboard with this journalism thing. As long as you are getting the sh— straight and you're not printing outlandish stuff and you correct things when you make mistakes—all of which you do, I'm not trying to mention anybody here—as long as that takes place, that's fine.

Keller: What's an example of taking the "journalistic" aspect too seriously?

Cornette: Well, the big flap about Dave and the 900 number thing. Jesus H. Christ, Dave is smart enough realize and everybody else would be smart enough to spot if all of a sudden he started favoring people on the 900 number and knocking people who didn't want to be on it... I don't think Dave Meltzer is going to change the way he looks at things just because of that. I think people would be able to tell if he really went off the deep end and if he started overpraising the hotline or people involved in the hotline. That's the way I look at things. I wouldn't do stuff like this on a radio show, television, or information service that could get to anybody unsolicited. That's the way that you really get the word out and hurt the business. Everything is going to be printed in the *Torch* or *Observer* whether I say anything or not, so once again it goes back to at least getting the stuff right.

Keller: If somebody doesn't have something to hide, is it beneficial to them to not ignore it but to actually communicate and respect it and correct it when things are wrong? Or for some people isn't it worth the effort?

Cornette: That's a broad question. Without knowing who, what, where, when and the

situation, that's tough.

Keller: What do you get out of reading a newsletter such as the *Torch*.

Cornette: I get a kick out of some of the stuff that is written. Plus, I'm such a wrestling nut and always have been. I've talked to a lot of you guys and appreciate your love for the business and that they watch the sh— 24 hours a day and live for it like I do. I think a lot of the people who write about wrestling are out of their minds, too.

Keller: That's very true.

Cornette: And it hasn't been that long since I've been in that position. I know also that most everybody who writes about wrestling—yourself included—not having been in it, don't really understand all of the problems that go along with the business, but want to. It's like, I don't understand the problems that go into the day-to-day production of a newsletter. You don't understand the day-to-day problems in promoting. I got into the wrestling business before the *Torch* or *Observer* were around. I'm on the outside looking in. You're on the outside looking in. But I'm more tolerant of that because I know you and Dave and most of the other people like the business and want to see it succeed. It's in your best interest for the wrestling business to succeed. You don't like to write that WCW stinks. You'd rather write good things. Other people are not that tolerant. I'm not trying to put myself over as saying I'm the goddamn pope because I've got the patience of a goddamn caged man-eating lion. It doesn't bother me.

I would rather see stuff like this than other stuff. I talked to Alex Marvez today, he called me. When I read his (*Miami Herald*) column and it reads, "Smoky Mountain owner/manager Jim Cornette," I was upset. That's a mainstream newspaper. When I went on Mike Tenay's radio show, I went, "Mike, I love you to death, you've been great to me, but I'm a manager in Smoky Mountain Wrestling and that's all I am or I can't be on the show." Otherwise, you're giving information to people who don't know how to handle the information. That, to me, is the difference. It's like nuclear disarmament. I'm not going to be able to stop you and don't have the right to stop you or Dave or anybody else from printing stuff, so at least I can help to get it correct to where the people who are really, really, really into this business don't have the wrong impression about what is going on. At the same time, don't do it in the daggum magazines and newspapers and radio shows and on TV where everybody is hearing about it. Then you aren't going to have a base to draw from.

We've sold tickets to the thousands who read the *Torch*; we've sold tickets to them anyway. We haven't to the 600,000 people who read the *Atlanta Constitution*. And we may not if they find out the whole thing is all bullsh—. That to



Jim Cornette and Midnight Express

Wade Keller

me is the difference.

Keller: So, you're not opposed to a newsletter like the *Torch*, but you are philosophically opposed to a Mike Tenay-style radio show?

Cornette: I've never heard Mike's show unless I'm on it.

Keller: Mike and I do radio shows with the same content as the *Torch*. For instance, we reviewed and reported on WCW's TV tapings in Orlando that reveal title changes ahead of time.

Cornette: Well, then once again, they open themselves up to that sh—. There ain't a thing in the world they can say about people talking about something they've done in front of thousands of people.

Keller: Even if WCW went out of its way to bring non-wrestling fans into the TV tapings and trained them on the premises how to respond? Is that doing enough to "protect the business" or at least prevent outcomes from being obvious to their customers?

Cornette: Why do a wrestling show in front of people who aren't wrestling fans? That's stupid to begin with. I think they ought to have people come in and hold up signs saying "sh—" or "good" reviewing their angles and matches as they occur. The public is the public. Do they think people aren't going to find out about it? I would say they can't be that stupid, but I'm sure they can be.

JIM CROCKETT

Jim Crockett Jr., 49, headed Jim Crockett Promotions under the NWA and WCW banners in the '80s. He sold JCP to Turner Broadcasting in 1988 to form a partnership that he and TBS believed would help the ailing promotion. Last year, Crockett was released from active duty with WCW after an on-and-off relationship with them. Now, almost five years later, Crockett wants to reenter the wrestling business. The following is "Torch Talk" series with Crockett conducted May 5, 1993 by phone from his home in Dallas, Tex. Crockett discusses, among other subjects, his immediate future in wrestling.

Wade Keller: For the record, what is your current status with WCW?

Jim Crockett Jr.: I am an officer of WCW and they have exercised a provision in my contract called a "pay, no play" provision which means they pay me and I do nothing. This came about during the early days of Kip Frey's stint.

Keller: What led to the Turner buyout of JCP?

Crockett: Let's see. Do I even want to respond to that one? Well, basically we had a lot of internal weaknesses. We outgrew our management capabilities. We'll say me. I was doing things that I wasn't qualified to do. So were a lot of other people in the company. The marriage as proposed sounded great. We were going to marry wrestling with all of this business expertise and television expertise and somehow it didn't work.

Keller: What is your opinion of TBS hiring people to run TBS without rich backgrounds in wrestling, such as Jim Herd? Was that good or bad given the television age wrestling had entered?

Crockett: I was furious when they did it. But it seems to be TBS's natural tendency to go with people they know and who are familiar with the television industry. So they went with a television person. I said and still say Jim Herd was sabotaged by people who gave him bad advice for their own personal gain. There for a while I thought he was a jerk, but it turned out he wasn't all that bad a guy once you started figuring out all the pieces to the puzzle and who was feeding him what. Okay, Jim Herd has an abrasive personality. So do I. That's why we didn't get along to start with. But he's not that bad of a guy. His intentions weren't as bad as a lot of people in this business thought. This man was fed some stuff that was unbelievable, but after two years and all of a sudden, "Wait a minute, maybe some people haven't been telling me the whole truth," then he's trying to get out of

it and then it's too late. Jim Herd got sabotaged in my opinion.

Keller: Do you think Kip Frey was a turn in the right direction or was he ripe to fall victim to the same problems?

Crockett: I wouldn't even want to comment on Kip Frey. I'll just stay out of that one... I don't know why they picked him. There are just so many "I don't knows" about that situation, I better not comment.

Keller: My initial impression was he was a pretty decent guy who was in over his head.

Crockett: The few times that it was a personal conversation, he was a nice guy. But after that, I'll pass.

Keller: Over the years you worked with Bill Watts a lot. Did you follow his recent stint in WCW? Was there a high curiosity factor there?

Crockett: Not much. He sort of pursued the direction I thought he would in terms of his approach to the business. I didn't think it would work. I was asked two years before they hired him if I thought he could do the job. They sent me a letter and I said no. He did exactly what I said he would do in that letter two years before they hired him.

Keller: What were the key things you predicted he would do?

Crockett: He had an obsession with legitimacy and you can't sell the business that way in my opinion. I'm saying you don't try to protect it. You don't insult the boys, you don't insult the fans by starting to say "legitimate." Don't flaunt it on either end.

Keller: You apparently are still interested in getting back into wrestling, right?

Crockett: Yes. Two reasons. One, I miss it. Two, I've got something to prove. A lot of people say my ideas won't work today, that I just got on the train that was already running and I had nothing to do with it. They hired everybody else who was on the train and it hadn't worked too well.

Keller: You want to try it on your own?

Crockett: Not on my own. That would imply I want again what happened before. I want to do what I'm good at. I want to leave the rest of it to what other people are good at. That's going to be the big difference.

Keller: Your name has been linked to a promotion that you cannot officially be a part of until the near end of this year.

Crockett: Jim Hudson has approached me about joining his effort. I've known Jim Hudson for years. I think he will do a good job on the business side of it. Paul E. (Paul Heyman) I've known for not as many years as I've known Jim, but I've always had a great deal of respect for him. I think he's a great cross between a student

of the old business but doesn't have the shackles of too much of the old school. He also has the youth and the energy to put in the 48 hour days. The rest of the people they are talking about adding, Charlie Pantuso with high-definition television, that's exciting just by itself. But by the same token I've called Ole Anderson and told them I want to get back into the business. I even called J.J. Dillon to see if Vince has any interest. I want to get back into the business.

Keller: What was the reaction from J.J. Dillon in the WWF?

Crockett: I do have a contract. The contract allows me to go out looking, but we really can't talk because of the superpower wars over legal problems. I've just let them know I want to get back into the business.

Keller: Where would you like to see the business in five years?

Crockett: I think you're going to see some regional operations spring up. I think Jim Cornette is there with his niche. How much bigger he will get, I don't know. He seems like a pretty bright guy. Again, it's talent and can he get it. I haven't seen one of his TV shows. I think Cornette's there to stay for as long as Jim wants to run it. If he tries to hire somebody to do what he's doing, he's got a problem. Vince is there as long as it's Vince's personality. If they try to change the personality (of the WWF), he'll have problems. I think Vince will be there. I think the Vince Sr. philosophy that Vince Jr. changed somewhat, I think they can stay in business as long as they stay doing what they're good at. If they try doing something else, then they're in trouble. WCW's in business as long as Turner wants it. That's a fact of life. He has deep pockets. It doesn't matter if they're losing money or not. I think you'll see some regional guys spring up. Some will be stronger than others. How many? California is a market unto itself. And it's got a problem with the recession. And you've got the rust belt and the Carolinas though a little bit bigger area than we used to run. You've got the Southwest. You can have four or five no problem. It would not affect the big-boys, but the big-boys need somebody to feed them talent.

Keller: So you'd like to see two or three major national promotions and several regional promotions feeding them talent?

Crockett: I think the business would be better off.

Keller: Where does pay-per-view fit in with house shows?

Crockett: I think they're going to have to separate them somehow in their approach to them. The pay-per-view is the pay-per-view and the house show is the house show. The house show cannot just be a feeder where you work angles to blow off at the pay-per-view. Guess what? The guy who's plunking down his \$12 to

You can't run the wrestling business behind closed doors, especially if you get away from the boys who actually have the ability to go out and do it and the people who pay their money. You have to give the fan something for the time he spends watching wrestling. That was probably my biggest mistake.

\$15 for ringside, it's not going to take him long to figure out he's not going to get to see the end of this story. And he quits (going to house shows).

Keller: In the way technology has changed involving cable and pay-per-view and national expansion, how have fans changed? Do you need to promote differently now that fans have seen so many different styles of wrestling and all of the big name talent?

Crockett: They've seen all of the big names and they've seen the guys who can't work being treated as big stars. Overexposure is a problem to a big degree, but I don't think there are more hours today than in 1988. There are fewer hours of wrestling now. In '87, '88, Vince was doing business, we were doing business. Of course, then it died off. Of course, the economy died off, too, but I think the promoters were trying to serve the wrong master. They said, "We have to have higher TV ratings, so we don't have to pay so much station costs." Then they went after pay-per-view. They forgot the best ratings system was the arena. If nobody would show up in the arenas, why are they going to do these other things. They just totally ignored the arenas and to some extent they have to this day. If you could ever say you were going to concentrate on the arenas and make it work, then everything else would work.

Keller: With the stress on national cable exposure, is it important to promote house shows nationally to give the image of being a major league national company or is it more important to concentrate on the territory where you are strongest for your house show business?

Crockett: I think the perception is you have to be perceived as being national, major league, however you want to describe it so the person in Greensboro or Dallas or wherever says, "Yeah, this is worth watching." You're talking about an entertainment thing and think it's a big deal. A lot of it has to do with the visual look and what you

say. You don't have to be on in New York City to make them think you're a big deal. What is cable penetration now, about 57 percent? About 40 percent of the population cannot even get the effort. If that's what you're on and they're paying you the most money, that's what you do. I'm not going to argue with that. I just think there are different niches to be filled.

Keller: If house shows are going well in one particular area and you're concentrating on that one area, do you have to hide that from fans in other areas so you don't seem too regional?

Crockett: Hypothetically, if you're trying to do a national TV show, you want to approach that one way. If you were going to do another show and syndicate it, then you approach it differently. Back when we did it, if we did something just for TBS, then syndication couldn't have it for two weeks. And vice-versa. So you had the separation of shows. Then internally we took it another step. The "A" show could have certain things, and "B" shows could have certain things, and they had their windows of opportunity. We made it almost a necessity to watch all four shows if you wanted all parts of the puzzle on one given weekend. You couldn't watch one show and get the whole picture. I think there are a lot of people who disagree with that philosophy, but it worked. Somebody else's philosophy may work; I haven't seen it working, but I liked what we did, and it did work. There is nothing wrong with saying we are going to do cable and promote just in the Georgia area. (Jim) Barnette did it for years. Ole did it for years. They ran a few towns in Ohio and a few towns in Georgia. They got ratings and drew money.

Keller: When you look back on the expansion of the mid-'80s, do you see that as an exciting time or a time when wrestling took a turn for the worse?

Crockett: Oh, I thought it was very exciting. Extremely exciting. It was a continual high. Every day there was something new. It was really just unbelievable. Everyday there was a new opportunity presented.

Keller: What are you most proud of when you look back on JCP's national expansion?

Crockett: I can't think of any one particular thing.

Keller: Are there major turning points where you now wish you had taken a different turn?

Crockett: During the days when I broke into the business through almost '87, if I did one thing, it was I listened to the fans and listened to the boys. I was willing to take a chance and it worked. If I hadn't taken the chance, what about the Ric Flairs and Ole Andersons. I could go on and on. The expansion did one thing. It took my time and energy away from probably my first love—that was messing with the arenas, going to the arenas and fine-tuning finishes. I'm not

saying I came up with finishes, but I knew how to fine tune them for the people who were there. I started doing other things. The door got closed and the people I used to listen to couldn't get to me. I was down to one or two people. You can't run the wrestling business behind closed doors, especially if you get away from the boys who actually have the ability to go out and do it and the people who pay their money. You have to give the fan something for the time he spends watching wrestling. That was probably my biggest mistake.

Keller: What are your first memories of pro wrestling?

Crockett: The way I learned the business was my father would tell me stories. There are no books. "This is what I did once and these are the circumstances." It was mile by mile. That is how a lot of the boys learned the business, too, of course. After that, I put up rings and did just about everything but wrestle and referee.

Keller: Did you ever think of becoming a wrestler?

Crockett: It never crossed my mind.

Keller: Why not?

Crockett: I just didn't think I had what it took, you know. I mean, the ones that are good are very good. It's a special talent.

Keller: Were you involved in athletics in high school?

Crockett: Yeah, football and basketball. I was offered a track scholarship at Wake Forest, but I decided to go to the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and I went up there and partied too much.

Keller: Going back even farther, how did your father originally get involved in wrestling?

Crockett: I don't remember the guy's name. He was based, I think out of Washington D.C. His name was Abe something. My father lived on the top side of Bristol, Tenn. He put on cards and started out like I did, driving people around. He was a junior college all-American at a school in Georgia. They needed way back when a resident to be a promoter in Charlotte, N.C. This was when my dad was single. He wanted to go to Florida, but you had to be a resident to promote. That's how he ended up going to Charlotte and he never left.

Keller: What do you think you would have done had your lifestyle not gotten you so involved with wrestling early in your life?

Crockett: I really couldn't tell ya'.

Keller: Maybe open an ice cream shop some day?

Crockett: Probably. (My father) was doing steam-table grills for different restaurants back then, so I was exposed to that and may have gone

that way.

Keller: When did you think that you would get involved in wrestling yourself? Was there never a doubt in your mind?

Crockett: Well, I don't know. Some kids grow up saying, "This is what I want to be." I really never thought about it. Then one day I said to my dad, "I want to go to work for you." My mother said no, my dad said yes, and that's the way it went.

Keller: We can tell who won that one. Tell me about your early days involved behind the scenes, being part of the promotion. How was it different than you thought it was going to be?

Crockett: Well, it was very disillusioning when they finally smartened me up to the business. I went for I don't know how long. I never went in the dressing room. It was all big kayfabe. I was sitting in the office one day because I had to go get coffee for them. I was sitting with the morning coffee and, I don't remember who it was now, but it was probably Bronco Lubich and Becker or Weaver or somebody like that. They started talking over the finish and all of a sudden they realized I was in the room. Everybody stopped. At that point I had probably been in the business three or four years. It was almost like Santa Claus; you know, but you don't want to know. So it was the first time a finish had been discussed where you knew what was what at that point. I was probably 21 or 22 years old.

Keller: How was the business different in terms of protecting the behind the scenes aspects?

Crockett: Well, now, everybody, they make no bones about it. There was no effort that I remember about saying it was legitimate. You just did not insult the fans by babyfaces and heels riding together, talking together. You just didn't flaunt it. It was a form of entertainment that people wanted to enjoy and you let them enjoy it. You didn't insult them.

Keller: Would you like to see things go back that way or is that impossible?

Crockett: Well, what you're trying to say is people won't go to movies if they know it's not real. They go. I don't think wrestling has that bad of a reputation. I just think people aren't tuning in because in one sense the people doing it are trying to turn them off.

Keller: As a business, do you think 10 years from now promoters will be willing to talk very openly about all aspects of wrestling just as movie directors talk openly and allow cameras behind the scenes? Or will it never go that far?

Crockett: I think it's a little bit more like magicians. You know that they're tricking you, but if they explain how it is, you no longer watch them. They tell you, "I'm going to trick you," and that's the end of it.

Keller: I know Jim Cornette has said in past "Torch Talks" that protecting the image that no aspect of the in-ring action is planned because once they find out the secret, they'll go once more, watch carefully and see things they didn't see before, figure things out, and then not go again. Do you disagree with that? It sounds as if you do.

Crockett: Well, I think they want to come and enjoy it. If you say, "We're legitimate" as Bill Watts tried to do, you turn them off completely. You are not legitimate and nobody is going to accept that. Then I think if you go the other way and say, "It's fake. Come watch it." They're not going to buy that either. It's somewhere in between of building these storylines and soap operas that people watch every day. They don't put up a sign every week that says, "This soap opera is fake. There's no reality." It just goes on and people watch it and enjoy it.

Keller: Why is it that people enjoy wrestling? As a promoter, you have to know what people are looking for when they tune in wrestling, right?

Crockett: Well, if I knew exactly that, as I used to say, you'd be sold out and have the highest ratings in the world. It's like the baseball player that bats .300 makes a lot of money. In wrestling, it's sort of the same way. You guess a lot. When you get too smart for your own good and try to outsmart the fans, (you get yourself into trouble). My dad always had a saying, "You promote what the fans want, not what you want." The minute you start trying to outsmart them, saying they're not too bright—they are very bright and they remember what you do—you get in trouble trying to outsmart them instead of doing the basics.

Keller: In general, do fans like wrestling for the athletics, or to boo and cheer, or for the interviews, or what? What do you tell people who ask you that question who aren't wrestling fans?

Crockett: It's a long-term building process. You don't go from 500 fans to 5,000 to 50,000 fans overnight. It is more of a happening. People like to hollar, they like to be entertained. If you have 10,000 people, you probably have 9,000 different reasons why people came to that building or watched the TV. It's ongoing, it's a social event, it becomes an emotional event. It's a whole lot of things. If you knew exactly what it was, in two years, you've made all the money in the world.

Keller: Obviously, not, the wrestling business has taken a downturn. What has happened to cause that?

Crockett: I haven't watched a WCW product in I don't know how long. They haven't asked me to. I just haven't watched it for a lot of reasons. The last time I was asked to go to some arenas, I went to four Baltimore shows in a row. And I heard suggested some of the dumbest finishes that I've ever heard. They insulted the fans that

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were there. They advertised a match "A-type" and they gave them a "C-type" finish. I mean, even though substitutions are going to happen, you don't want any more than necessary. When I went into Baltimore the first time, it was a \$14,000 or \$17,000 house. When I left, the show after it went to \$44,000. It boiled down to them doing silly finishes for the personalities they had. A finish you do in Greensboro may not work in Baltimore. You have to adapt it to those fans who are in that arena. I think too many people tried to say, "Let's do this particular ref finish." It worked 20 years ago, so it's going to work now. Well, the fans who were there 20 years ago were set in a certain mood by so many hours of TV, by so many matches ahead of time, and so on. And the finish might have worked. This is not a one-night happening. It's an ongoing building process and you have to keep that in mind. What went on in this town, how many times have they been burned on finishes?

Keller: Did you find while promoting in the Mid-Atlantic area that from town to town, even in towns as close as Greensboro and Charlotte, you really did have to promote differently for each town? Give me an example.

Crockett: Boy, it's been awhile. Norfolk and Richmond were, what, 90 miles apart. They were very different towns. Greensboro and Charlotte were very different because of the way people came. Greensboro drew from 100, 150 miles away. Charlotte's radius was a lot smaller. Greenville to Spartanburgh to Asheville, very different. Each town had its own personality.

Keller: Did you see in your final years active with WCW any acknowledgment of the need to promote differently from town to town?

Crockett: I'd rather not comment on why they do things because nobody has ever tried to explain why or what they're trying to do. I believe that every town has its own personality. I believe you should respond to that personality. The talent WCW has today is as good as I ever

had. Talent isn't their problem. Vince has an excellent crew of people up there.

Keller: Do you ever think along the line, you had the chance to become the strongest promotion in the country, or do you believe Hulk Hogan's presence in the WWF precluded that from ever happening?

Crockett: Hogan is and was a formidable adversary. Hindsight being 20/20, we could have made it. I don't think that internally we were geared to handle a lot of the (things we encountered). We were biting off big chunks and couldn't swallow them.

Keller: What was it that Vince McMahon had that you didn't in terms of handling expansion?

Crockett: I think a lot of people underestimate Linda McMahon's value to that company. I don't know who supplies the business savvy in terms of the internal accounting and research and that kind of stuff. That was very valuable and we did not try to do that. We didn't make any effort to get computerized. We made a feeble attempt. We spend a \$100,000 on a program that didn't do much. We didn't pursue a lot of the things Vince did.

Keller: How do you think computers would have helped you?

Crockett: In tracking ratings and time sales. Without being able to analyze the information that you can get your hands on in the wrestling business, we didn't pursue the marketing aspects. He was in New York, we're in Charlotte, North

Carolina. People didn't stop by and say, "Hey, why don't you try this." He started doing it and we didn't pursue it. We decided to stay on the arenas. We were very good at it. I think we were actually the best in the arena business. I don't remember ever going in for a battle for a town and losing. But there's more to it than that.

Keller: What was it about the arena business that you were stronger in?

Crockett: Well, I think that is probably just a different approach to business. Vince's father taught him one way and my father taught me another. They were geared, I think, even in the old days, toward the big shows. Even though they ran a lot of small towns, they were geared toward the Boston Garden, Madison Square Garden. Whereas we were geared for every town being important. I mean, every town was important. There was not an unimportant town to us. I mean the workrate in Kingstreet, S.C. and Greensboro, N.C. had to be the same. And that's how I was brought up. And to be able to stand in any building and say, "This is right for this building was my strong point.

Keller: What about the idea of "episodic house shows." I'm not sure if that's the best terminology, but it seemed you were strong in having one arena show logically lead to the next one whereas the WWF wasn't. Was that important?

Crockett: Yeah, life or death. I think if you approach your house shows and your TVs that way, then a lot of other things will fall into place. That term is the wrong term. It's a nice catchy phrase in the television world, but it doesn't probably describe what you should be doing. I think what it implies to people I've been around in the television business who are not in the wrestling business is, "We're talking about some of the same things, we're doing some of the same things, therefore it is episodic." Wrong. They don't understand how that applies to wrestling in my mind. The fact that you've got this one guy who hasn't won a match, that's just a part of it. There are a million parts to the way these five to eight matches have to be handled. The two most important matches on the card, the way I grew up in the business, were the first and last.

Keller: Why is that?

Crockett: Well, the first match sets the tone for the entire evening. Does the referee have control? Do you have heels and babyfaces? Do you have rules? There are a lot of things that need to be established every night. And the last match determines in what exact frame of mind you are going to leave the people. If you're going to turn them, then the earlier you have to satisfy them.

Keller: What were the strong points of Dusty Rhodes?

Crockett: Vince was doing well. What I wanted was somebody who was willing to dream as big a dream as I was. He did. He fit that bill.

He came up with Starrcade. I went to him and told him I wanted four major promotions a year so you had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Starrcade was the end of a program. Then there was the Bunkhouse Stampede, Great American Bash, and Crockett Cup. You built for it and then it was over. The end was the important thing, but it was also building toward something big. Now it seems everybody builds for something but it doesn't ever end. They have finishes but they're not really finishes.

Keller: Everybody talks about Dusty's vision, but on a day to day basis did Dusty have leadership qualities with wrestlers or was it his creativity behind closed doors that was his strong point?

Crockett: Let's skip that one. He's still affiliated with the position so I don't want to say anything. We had several good years.

Keller: What do you think are your stronger points besides the arena business?

Crockett: The arenas. As an extension of that, being able to find talent. And listening to talent. I mean, there's not a whole lot of talent that I'm aware of who thought I was a big jerk. I made mistakes so there are some who will say, "Hey, he did screw up." But I wasn't a bad guy. That's because I listened to them. That allowed us to grow.

Keller: What about your greatest weakness?

Crockett: Follow-through. That's a major weakness of mine. I come up with a great idea, but I just don't follow through.

Keller: A lot of people, when they look back at the 1988 Starrcade where the Road Warriors had apparently won the tag team titles, but then they were taken away due to an earlier referee bump, say that really killed Chicago as a market for the NWA. Do you agree that was one of the times a town was burned one too many times?

Crockett: I don't remember the specific finish, but we did get away from doing what was right. But, see, that was getting into the stage when I was getting distracted. It wasn't just Flair saying, "What about this, what about this?" But, I started getting away from what was right. Like it or not, there are some rules to wrestling. The one thing I did learn in the wrestling business is you want to surround yourself with the best group of wrestling minds possible and you want to listen to them. Not all of them will come to the office. You sometimes have to go to their turf where they feel comfortable. For some, that's the dressing room, for others, different places. Get them to tell you why they think this finish is working or isn't working or why this guy is working or isn't working or getting over. What I'm saying is Flair was and hopefully still is extremely bright. I used to listen to him a lot. The wrestlers like Flair, I used to listen to them—him and Wahoo McDaniel were the ones who



Dusty Rhodes

Wade Keller

suggested to me I get Richard Blood who went on to become Ricky Steamboat. But the finish you referred to was not a good finish. There were a lot of bad finishes.

Keller: You obviously are familiar with the term, "Dusty Finish." It continues to happen today...

Crockett: I have to take the blame for it. It was something that was allowed to go on. I say allowed because if I'm going to take any of the credit, I also have to take some heat. It was wrong. Dusty Rhodes is very good at some things. He's still active in the business and he works for WCW so I don't want to criticize him in any way.

Keller: Philosophically, what is the defense for the "Dusty finish?" Obviously it works in certain situations and you're saying perhaps it was overused.

Crockett: I think a lot of people use the term, the "Dusty finish," although I think there are a lot of other people you could sort of credit it to. But the "Dusty finish" is a non-finish. You can use a non-finish if you have in fact established ahead of time you have rules and you have finishes. Then, when you do it, it's okay. It's when it becomes the rule of no-finishes or no-ends to programs that you have problems. You have to have winners and losers. If you don't believe that, why does basketball have overtime and why does baseball have extra innings? You have to have the opportunity to have or make the people think this story is going to have an end. What they've done is taken the term "episodic TV" and said, "Okay, we're not having finishes, but we've got this ongoing story." That's wrong, okay? It's episodic, yes, in the television sense that the same people are fighting the same battles, but it's wrong for wrestling.

Keller: So there's good and bad "episodic television?"

Crockett: You have to have a beginning, middle, and an end. For years, when I was brought up, there was a beginning, middle, and an end. Somewhere in the '80s, the end was forgotten. They had beginnings and they had middles, but they didn't have any ends.

Keller: How important is workrate?

Crockett: How important? It depends on how successful you want to be. If you want to be just so-so, then it's not so important. People can tell. That's like asking, is it important if you have a good actor or bad actor? You can make a movie if you have a good director and trick the people once. You can't make movie after movie after movie without good actors.

Keller: Without second-guessing one of the brilliant promoters of this era, Vince McMahon, what do you think of his philosophy of not getting a strong workrate out of his wrestlers on a consistent basis? Do you think McMahon

would have been more successful had he stressed workrate more and gotten better matches out of his wrestlers?

Crockett: I don't know. I went to some of his shows in New York when Vince Sr. was alive. They were not great workrate matches. Not at all. The fans up there had been educated to enjoy a certain style and when Vince concentrates on what his fans are educated to, he does extremely well. You can't compare the two. They were very different. You go back to the night in Philadelphia when we both ran the same night and we both sold out. When he stays with what he is good at and targets the fans he has educated a certain way, he is very successful. I think one of the worst things they did with Hulk Hogan was make him go 25 minutes with Harley Race. That was out of context for Hulk Hogan. When it comes to our business, he is one of the top one-two-three superstars of all-time. I mean, Flair as a worker, Hogan as a star, you go back to Bruno, there are some others. But they took him out of context and it hurt him for a little while. Maybe they were trying to compete with us or something. I don't know what they were trying to do. But I said if they kept that up, they were going to kill the goose that's laying the golden egg. So, you can't criticize Vince for what he's doing. When he stays with what he's good at, it works extremely well. If you can find that niche and fill it, you'll be successful.

Keller: So if you find a niche without a strong workrate, then workrate really isn't all that important?

Crockett: In Japan, each of the groups' fans in Japan are educated to a big time workrate, yet Hulk Hogan's a superstar over there, so there are exceptions to all the rules.

Keller: If you were to build a promotion from scratch, though, workrate would be an integral part?

Crockett: If I were to start over—and we'll say if—I think you have to have a balance of veterans and young guys, but everybody has got to be willing to give 100 percent every night to everything they've got and be willing to learn. Some of the best workers in the business are lazy. That doesn't do any good. And you have to have that magic called charisma.

Keller: Obviously, the business is changing a lot constantly. But how would you rate the most recent five-year period since 1988 versus any other five year period? Is this a period of greater change than ever?

Crockett: To go from New York City having a big house, we were doing a big house, Roy Schire was doing a big house, and all that. That was one era. Then you had the weeding out for whatever reason. I think one of the downfalls of the business today is you don't have any new talent coming in. Vince's heyday and to some extent our heyday was fueled by this input of talent that was capable of drawing money. When this talent

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supply is cut off, and it has for all practical purposes been cut off for seven or eight years—I mean, there are still small promoters—but at one time the 26 promoters fueled Vince and me for new talent. When they were swallowed up, run out of business, chased off, what happened to the big boys? Especially with their approach to ratings and pay-per-view, they've lost their base.

Keller: Where did the talent come from in those 26 territories?

Crockett: You go to a match and every night there's somebody saying, "I could whip him," or "I want to get into the business." I mean, you had 26 promoters so you had 26 events a night and there was always somebody walking up saying, "I want to be" something. Out of enough "I want to be" there's going to be some good guys who can draw money. The thing is you cannot learn the business in a book or in a school. You've got to get on stage and learn your trade. Crowd psychology can only be learned in the ring. And you can't learn it in a two minute television match.

Keller: People talk about the return of the 26 territories. Is that possible or even desirable?

Crockett: I think if the two superpowers want to survive, they are probably each going to want two or three friendly territories with some sort of agreement as far as sharing talent. What happens to, say, a Ric Flair, who has a one or two year stint and he begins to get a little stale. What do you do with him? Do you pay him to be off for six months? Vince has gone overseas with his. WCW's trying that now. It still gets to a stale point. The Flairs you can afford to pay to be off six months, but let's drop down two notches. That guy could in the old days go work for another territory. I'm not exactly sure how that would work in today's world, but somebody better figure it out. It's trial and error. Where are you going to get the new bookers? Where are you going to get the new announcers. There is all of

this new stuff that needs to come. It has to come from going out and trying it and doing it.

Keller: How different are the wrestlers' schedules today compared to the days of the 26 territories?

Crockett: Back when I got into the business, you didn't work on Sundays, period. They worked six days and had one day off. Then it went to working as many days as you could, because you only got paid if you worked. Now you get paid if you don't work and that's created another problem. I think there has to be a balance. A wrestler has a limited time to make his money, just like other pro athletes. He has a longer longevity. But actually I think the wrestler has as short an earning career as most football players. It takes so long to learn the trade, then you have a five or ten year earning period. Then you're too old. You have to get it while you can. Now they're getting it through big contracts. But a big contract doesn't necessarily mean a big return for the people paying it.

Keller: What do you think would be your approach to steroids if you reenter wrestling?

Crockett: Well, steroids are now an illegal substance. My policy always was what a guy did on his off time was his business. But if it's illegal it becomes my problem. A guy's personal life cannot cause the promoter a problem. I don't think I could afford as a regional promoter to do the drug testing to stamp it out. I would have to say, "If I find out about it or you're charged with it, you're out." Most steroids are classified like heroine now, so you have to treat it the same way.

Keller: What about the ethical issue of two guys, one guy appearing muscularly bigger from what you believe is steroid use—if the steroid guy will draw you more attention or more money, do you sacrifice that extra drawing power to play it safe and go with the leaner guy even if you believe there will be less interest as a result?

Crockett: Do I want Hawk or do I want Ricky Morton?

Keller: No. It's the difference between two guys around Hawks size, one on steroids, one not on steroids.

Crockett: There is a need for a large, wide-body in the business. But one of the big mistakes the business made was thinking bigger is better. They forgot you have to be able to walk and talk and work. And you ended up with a bunch of wide bodies that can't do but one thing at a time.

Keller: What about your choice to hire a guy you are pretty sure is or has very recently been on steroids to gain size who can also work and do interviews?

Crockett: You're asking, for instance, if I would use Hawk. Hawk has used. He tells me he gets off, he gets on. I haven't talked to him recently. I would use Hawk because Hawk has

ability. We have a problem that if Hawk is using them, we would have to address it at some point. I don't know how. Will I use a guy just because he's going to blow himself up from 200 to 400? No. Size has nothing to do with it. Big bodies don't sell. That's a problem the business has.

Keller: So you won't unofficially reserve a spot for a steroided guy as some believe Vince essentially did when he thought he and his promotion were invincible?

Crockett: Would I take a Hulk Hogan who just came out of a movie if he was big? You'd be a fool not to. By the same token, I don't know how you handle that. I couldn't afford to drug test. If I walked into the dressing room and saw a guy with a bag of grass, guess what? He has to go. That was a rule.

Keller: So if there's something you can do about it, you will. And if there's a way to discourage use by not doing something, you will not do that something?

Crockett: Are you asking if we would do the equivalent of NBC banning a rock star from their TV shows because they know he is on drugs?

Keller: Yes. I'm asking how far are you going to go?

Crockett: Well, when I used to be in the business, when you walk into the dressing room, a guy's drunk, "Get out of here." There's a bag of grass. Same thing. I had guys show up that were drunk and they could go to the ring and cover it up and give you the greatest performance of all time. We're not going to do that.

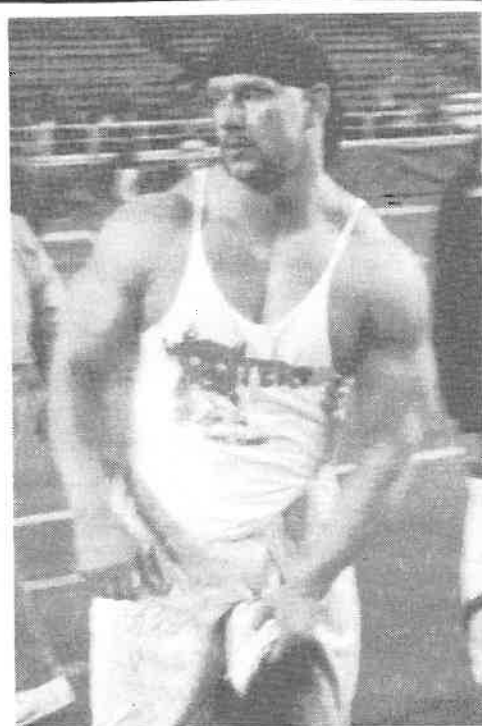
Keller: Give me some names (laughs).

Crockett: (laughs) Some of them are still around.

Keller: What about the portrayal of women and minorities? Wrestling doesn't have a great track record of overcoming stereotypes, presumably because either promoters are out of touch with the idea of treating certain people with decency or they believe it will draw money. Heck, it's only pro wrestling, right? Or would you break the pattern of racist and exclusively dumb-blonde female characters?

Crockett: I think what you have to do is use people with talent. There are a lot of good black wrestlers and a lot of good women. Madusa is probably one of the best workers in the business. The problem is there is no one to work with her. As a new promotion, I'd love to have some good women and blacks with good workrates. Finding them, well, the good ones are going to be snapped up by someone else. I think the portrayal like that of Sailor Art Thomas is over.

Keller: Do you think the racist angle involving Ole Anderson, Ric Flair, and Junkyard Dog a few years ago is out of bounds today—not to mention was it out of bounds then? Or is all that matters what will draw



Hawk

Wade Keller

money?

Crockett: Personally, I think it's wrong. We have done it. I have allowed it. Personally, I think it's wrong. But let's talk business. It's not going to work. You're insulting too many people. It is wrong and people now have the social conscience to say it is wrong. They will stand up and say it's wrong. Personally, I don't like it and won't go for it now, and secondly, it's bad business. One of the worst mistakes we made was in April of 1988 doing an angle—I don't remember exactly how it went—with Kevin Sullivan and Dusty. Our ratings nosedived right after that. We did that one and right after we did the Midnight Rider. They didn't buy either one. It took us forever to get them turned back around. You can't insult the fans.

Keller: Do you think "Flair for the Gold" last weekend with a woman named Fifi portraying a bumbling idiot is insulting to fans, especially when that is an extension of the only role women have recently played in WCW?

Crockett: Flair has always had the sex symbol type of thing. I did not see what you are referring to. But it's been done for years with Flair. It's wrong. If that's his gimmick, that's one thing, but then you have to balance it out with what reality is. Heck, my wife runs my house. We did some things poorly with women and I hope I never do them again... Like I said, when I first got started, Sailor Art Thomas just left the business because of the way it was being handled. He drew a lot of money. You can just go on and on (with examples). There are some great athletes out there and they need to be used. If they have charisma and you guess right, it's going to work. If you use them wrong, it's going to backfire and you'll be out of business.

CHRIS CRUISE

Christopher Cruise is living his dream. He grew up watching and loving wrestling and now he is a broadcast journalist by trade. Several weeks ago his favorite sport crossed paths with his career. Chris Cruise recently was hired as the new host of NWA World Wide Wrestling. With a resume longer than most five year olds' Christmas lists, Cruise is impressing most viewers after only a few weeks hosting the NWA's number one syndicated show. The interview was conducted in November 1989.

Wade Keller: Congratulations on your new position as host of NWA WorldWide Wrestling. After a month, how do you like your new job?

Chris Cruise: It's a dream come true. I must admit I started out really intimidated by Jim Ross and by the talent in the NWA, but they have been extremely supportive. People have gone out of their way to make me feel at home. And just a month into it I feel I've been at it for years and already feel that I want to be there for many more years.

Keller: Does your job with the NWA go beyond the announcing we see on television?

Cruise: We haven't come to terms on exactly what they need from me or want from me. I want to spend some time in the office. I want to spend some time in the office doing affiliate relations and public relations. I think I'm good at that. I've

proven in the past that I can do that—get my own name in print as well as the name of other organizations and other politicians for whom I've worked in print.

Keller: In addition to being a wrestling announcer, are you a big wrestling fan?

Cruise: Let me tell you this. I hate sports with a passion. Maybe I should say I hate America's love of sports. There're so many more things that are more important. For instance, I think it was an abomination that the World Series was played (after the earthquake). They should have been stopped immediately. The only sport I ever loved has been professional wrestling. I guess I should admit I like the Red Sox and kind of the Celtics, but since I was nine years old, I've loved wrestling. I had a difficult childhood and the only thing that has been consistent and consistently good in my life is professional wrestling. The other day I was sitting down for supper with a couple of other wrestlers and they said to me jokingly, "Gee, you must feel honored to be here." And the fact is, even though they were being sarcastic and joking, I did feel very honored to be there and I told them that.

Keller: Has becoming a pro wrestling announcer been a long term goal of yours or has it been a dream you thought you would never attain?

Cruise: It just seemed so far away, so improbable. How many wrestling announcers are there in the country? It was really a longshot. I called the NWA and told them of my previous experience in wrestling. I guess always my long-term goal in life had been to become a lawyer and I still hope to achieve that. This strikes me as something that's so much fun and to get paid for it, I know it's a cliché, but it seems like a dream.

Keller: You mentioned becoming a lawyer. Is announcing for the NWA just a stepping stone in your career?

Cruise: Well, I'm finishing up my degree now part time. At 30 years old, I should have had it done a long time ago, but I travel a lot and I have some regrets. I'm concerned about that. Since I've always wanted to go to law school I'm just surprised that that dream has been so quickly washed away by this job because I love it so much. I can't conceive of not working for the NWA. I can't conceive of not doing this. Bob Caudle and Lance Russell have had long, glorious careers doing this. I see them, of course, every week and we're turning into I think really good friends. And they just tell me wonderful things about how great it is to be in this business. I think I'd be foolish not to, so maybe I can get... ah... can you get a law degree by correspondence course? Who knows? I'll try anything. I really want to stick with this and that's rare with me. I have a very short attention span. In fact, my friends call me a "boat without a rudder." I like to think of myself as a "yacht without a rudder." I'm

not a company man by any means, but I really sense this should be a long-term thing for me.

Keller: So far, what's surprised you the most about being an announcer?

Cruise: The level of audience reaction to the NWA. Of course, in Maine, we never knew of the NWA. We knew of the WWF. We knew of the World Wide Wrestling Federation. We have a little place that used to be a dump, now it's fixed up, the Portland Exhibition Building. Chief Jay Strongbow would be there, and of course, Bruno Sammartino, and Professor Toru Tanaka and they would just pack the place and it would be screaming. Well, I was at a Titan (WWF) card at the County Civic Center about a month ago and it was so dull and deadly and boring, I wanted to walk out. I felt like I didn't get my money's worth and I didn't even pay for the ticket. I was in Gainesville, Ga. a week ago and it was like I was transported back in time to about 20 years ago to when wrestling fans went absolutely berserk and crazy. That's been the biggest surprise. After seeing the fans at Titan's shows, they get emotional, but I sometimes sense Titan fans feel they're part of the act, too. But in the NWA you see these rabid, crazy fans.

Keller: There are a lot of people who would also like to become pro wrestling announcers. If they are serious, what advice would you give them?

Cruise: One of the ways I got this job was I just called Jim Herd. You have to have some experience, though. I have extensive broadcast experience. I absolutely love the camera. I love people to notice me. I'm a real ham. I have a big ego. I think you have to have some wrestling experience. I worked for a small federation called the United States Wrestling Federation. There's a million independents out there. You can tape shows and put them on your own audio cassettes. You can do your own play-by-play by turning the sound down. My advice is to get to know the holds. People are impressed that I know the holds. Be comfortable. Learn to love to be in front of the camera. Work on your appearance. If you appearance is objectionable, you're just not going to get on the air. You don't have to be handsome, but you have to be acceptable. And send tapes in. Don't be afraid to be bold. If you want to work for the World Wrestling Federation, call Vince McMahon. Just don't be afraid to listen to people say no. You just have to get used to that. I got sick of being told no. But the times you're being told yes, boy it's great.

Keller: What is your preparation for each TV taping?

Cruise: We usually have a run-down sheet of matches. If Flyin' Brian is fighting or Lex Luger is fighting, I make notes to myself about their background, about some of the feuds they may have been engaged in. My intent at this point is not to call the match like it's on radio or the 900



Christopher Cruise

Wade Keller

line, but still to call it a little closer than has been done in the past. Vince at one time was one of the best play-by-play announcers in the business. He probably still is, but he doesn't call the holds a lot, you'll notice. He'll talk about the feuds and everything. I'll just sit down and have some quiet time with some of the other announcers and talk about what the wrestlers have been doing in their off-time that may be of interest to some of the listeners and to the viewers. I'm calling the match as it happens. We don't post-produce things, so we are right there. We're watching the monitor; we're watching the crowd; we're watching the ring. We need three or four eyes. You know, when things are exciting, when the crowd is cheering, I get excited, too. So I guess the key to preparation is not to overprepare, just to be ready to call anything and be as spontaneous as you possibly can be. The most important thing, and this I learned from Jim Ross, is to be upbeat and excitable. Say, "Hey, it's great to be here. We love wrestling. Fans, we're glad you're here."

Keller: What do you think are your strongest and weakest announcing skills?

Cruise: My strongest may be that I love wrestling and I hope and think that comes through. Weakest has got to be lack of depth in background in the NWA. I know the World Wrestling Federation very well. I really would like to know more about the NWA. And that's what I do—I spend time going through some old wrestling magazines that friends have—thousands of them actually—to try to get as much background as possible. Although I don't want to inundate viewers with obscure title defenses, I think it's important to know some of the background of a man like Terry Funk. He didn't just appear on the scene last year.

Keller: As far as announcing, what do you think of Jim Ross?

Cruise: Excitable. Great role model. Somebody who is going to go beyond the bounds of announcing.

Keller: Vince McMahon?

Cruise: In terms of straight-forward announcing, I've always thought Vince was one of the best. I've watched him for 20 years and I think that he's one of my role models in terms of announcing.

Keller: Lance Russell?

Cruise: Personally, just the absolute most classiest, nicest fellow. We were doing the half-hour wrap-up after Halloween Havoc on the 900 line. I jumped in there with him and Gordon Solie. I knew he was talented and knew he could think on his feet, but Wade, we had to talk for 30 minutes about Halloween Havoc. He is just a storehouse of knowledge. Just so calm and so cool, yet he's still able to get excited. How, after 20 years of doing this, he can still get excited

about wrestling is beyond me. And he does it night after night, week after week.

Keller: Do you think he is underutilized?

Cruise: You know, I have heard that criticism, but Lance always seems happy with his schedule. He's got the syndicated Main Event and the NWA Pro syndicated show with Bob Caudle. I know he's really a favorite among many of the fans.

Keller: Lee Marshall?

Cruise: Lee is really underrated, isn't he? I watch him on the AWA and I'm constantly surprised he's not with the World Wrestling Federation or the NWA. He's just very underrated, very appealing.

Keller: I agree. I think he and Nick Bockwinkel are two of the more credible teams.

Cruise: Boy, Nick Bockwinkel has credibility written all over him. There's one guy, and he's my friend, but Bruno Sammartino I've always thought was always highly underrated as a color and a play-by-play announcer. I think he's one of the best. I would've always loved to work with Bruno and would still like to.

Keller: Do you think there's a chance he'll do color for the NWA?

Cruise: The weekly travel is not something he'd agree to. But I think based on the reaction he got in Philadelphia, the NWA has got to say this guy is still selling tickets. I would like to see him do some pay-per-views and some Clashes. I can only say that as a fan. I'm certainly not in power to do anything about it.

Keller: What do you think of Jesse Ventura as a color commentator?

Cruise: I will be honest and say Jesse makes me laugh. I used to fast-forward through a lot of Titan stuff and sometimes the only thing interesting about Titan stuff is Jesse. Strangely enough, I think putting Jesse on just one syndicated show is underutilizing him. I'd like to see Jesse on prime Time Wrestling every Monday night.

Keller: How about Bob Caudle?

Cruise: Bob seems so steady. I didn't work with him on the 900 line, but I have worked with him on a couple of tapings when I was trying out. Bob is underrated. It's really easy to criticize Bob because he's not punchy and he doesn't grab the limelight. But Bob has been in this business a long, long time. I constantly read "Lines of the Week" with Bob Caudle. He always comes up with some zingers. I think it's really easy to overlook Bob, but if you do you'd be making a mistake.

Keller: Gordon Solie?

Cruise: Gordon Solie, the dean of wrestling announcers, you'd figure would have some kind

I'm not much one for cats, but if people told me that they display cats in cat shows, I wouldn't say that I hate cats and cat shows. Yet people feel that they need to express their opinion about wrestling.

of an ego, but from day one, Gordon has been patient with me, taught me, come up with ideas and questions and suggestions and criticisms for me. He's just one of the many people who have been supportive of me.

Keller: How do you handle the situation when people criticize your involvement in wrestling?

Cruise: I used to be real patient, Wade. I really did. I was on a date just last night. She was from Minneapolis, in fact, and she remembered Verne Gagne. It's just like a broken record. They all say the same thing. They say, "Oh, those guys are so big and sweaty, and 'Oh, that's so fake.'" If I'm caught in a situation where I have to respond to it, I say a version of "different strokes for different folks." Then there are other times when I simply will not talk about it. This is one of the most important things in my life and I feel insulted. People may have opinions, and I have opinions about certain things. I'm not much one for cats, but if people told me that they display cats in cat shows, I wouldn't say that I hate cats and cat shows. Yet people feel that they need to express their opinion about professional wrestling but the fact is that millions of people in this country absolutely love professional wrestling. I'm not going to sit there and listen to people criticize the sport I love so much.

Keller: You mentioned your past involvement in the WWF. When was that?

Cruise: Very briefly I was in media and public relations for Wrestlemania I. I think the WWF of 1985 is so different than the one in 1989. I don't know if a comparison would be appropriate. There was one thing that there was never a question of—that is who was boss. There was no doubt that if Vince McMahon Jr. told you to do something, you did it. There was never any doubt from where the power would emanate. There were bookers. I think George Scott was there at the time and all of the wrestlers had egos, of course, and they wanted to do certain things. But when push came to shove, if Vince wanted you to do it, you did it, and there was no question about it. It seemed like an organization that had a sense of its own destiny, a sense of what it wanted to do with itself. It had real concrete goals in mind and a game plan to accomplish what it wanted to.

—Please see CRUISE, pg. 45

PAUL E. DANGEROUSLY

Paul E. Dangerously, born Paul Heyman, at age 24 has developed into one of the most influential people in professional wrestling. He was editor of two wrestling magazines at age 19 after running fan clubs and bulletins for over a half dozen years. At age 20 he was announcing for the NWF. He moved into managing as Paul E. Dangerously and by the age of 21 he had managed in the NWF (New York), CWA (Memphis), AWA (Minneapolis), and CWF (Alabama). After a stint in the NWA and being fired, many are wondering what this young wrestling mind is up to. In this "Torch Talk" Paul E. Dangerously discusses his plans for the future and his thoughts on the past. This interview was conducted in January 1990.

Keller: How did you get the name Paul E. Dangerously?

Dangerously: When I was doing college radio in 1984, I was doing a very wild type of show and it was beyond the boundaries of what radio was like then. I was doing shock-jock radio back in 1984 before it was popular. I was always doing the catch phrase, "Live Dangerously." I had a reputation in high school and college from



Paul E. Dangerously

Wade Keller

driving my car very, very fast. I always had the reputation of living that way. When I decided to become the manager at the time, whether it was due to hairline, facial expressions, or just based on the character he played on "Night Shift," I was always being compared to Michael Keaton, who just starred in a movie called "Johnny Dangerously." As a joke, I had a t-shirt made up that said, "Paul E. Dangerously." I went out to dinner in New York City with Bam Bam Bigelow and Bigelow, who was the person who dared me to become a manager, said, "I like that name, Use it." And it's been with me ever since.

Keller: Is your ultimate goal to work for the WWF?

Dangerously: Ever since I started, everybody always thought that was my ultimate goal. My ultimate goal is to have the freedom to do what I do best. For eight or nine months in 1989, I thought that the greatest place in the world to be was the NWA. I thought no matter how much money I was offered to do anything else, whether it would be to do TV shows or movies or the WWF or anything, I would never leave there because of the NWA Main Event, because of the great people who were there, because it was an exciting place to be.

My ultimate goal is not to be in any particular place. My ultimate goal is to let Paul E. Dangerously grow and to bring the kind of sports entertainment I'm capable of into everybody's home every week on television and at the arena. Whether that would be in the WWF or the NWA or wherever, I don't care. I still have a lot to learn and a lot of room for growth. Would I like to go to the WWF? It's been thought about; it's been talked about. We've talked. Like anybody else in this business, I have to make a living. This is my career and if that's where my next career move is, that's where I'll go. It all depends on what the scene of things shows.

Keller: Would you feel hindered by scripted interviews?

Dangerously: I hate to use the expression, "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." In the NWA when I got there, the format of the NWA Main Event was that there were two announcers and they said, "We are now going to this match. I'm sure it's a great one" and then the next guy would say, "This match took place in Cleveland. Let's go watch it." I became the co-host of the show initially with Tony Schiavone. We tried to do that for one segment. The segment was on Ricky Steamboat who just returned and I told Tony, "You do anything you want because I don't need to do this." And I stood behind Tony jumping behind him going, "Rick—y Steamboat, Rick—y Steamboat." They liked it so much they said, "Do whatever you want. Go wild on camera."

I have never been handed a script. I have never read cue cards or a teleprompter. I have always done things off the top of my head. It has worked

best for me that way and I would like to continue to do it that way. However, I have never been in that situation so I don't know how I would react to it.

Keller: What were the circumstances that led to your departure from the NWA?

Dangerously: Well, that's the "million dollar question." That's something that both I and everybody I associate with have been trying to figure out for several months. There was a story that was published in *Chokehold* newsletter that comes out of Chicago. It was sent to me; I read it. I don't know where the editor/publisher got the story. It wasn't completely accurate, but it had the argument that occurred after I was fired from the NWA pretty much down pat. It wasn't as one-sided on my part as it may seem.

I was hosting the NWA Main Event show. I was informed by the NWA that because in July, August, and September it was the highest rated show of any kind on cable television—that's not a boast or a brag; that has been published in cable magazines—they were very worried about messing with that formula. I was very tired from being on the road for 90 days at a time. I was at the point of exhaustion. They wanted to take me off the road and make me a strictly television commentator. I had some worries about it that I had expressed. They assured me that this was a promotion, not a demotion.

I had finally agreed to it for several weeks and because of nothing more than a personality conflict with somebody very high up in the NWA (Ric Flair), because of nothing more than this person's insecurity about someone whom I knew (Eddie Gilbert) who perhaps threatened his position within the NWA because of this other person's knowledge at his job, this person decided to take it out on me and not only take it out on me, but also to hamper this other person's efforts by firing me, which it was in his power to do even though I was under contract.

I had never violated my contract with the NWA. I still had over five and a half months left on my contract. I had probably been the most loyal employee to serve that company since I came in November 1, 1988. And the now-famous argument which occurred with this particular person after my firing happened because of my shock at being fired when the people, whether they loved me or they hated me, they were watching me. They were watching the NWA Main Event.

People can say now the NWA Main Event still has good ratings. Yeah, but they're giving them Ric Flair versus Bobby Eaton. When I was hosting the NWA Main Event we had main event matches like Dick Murdoch versus Bill Irwin, we had Ron Simmons versus Tommy Rich, and we every single week, bar none, did better ratings than World Championship Wrestling on Saturday nights. For eight years of wrestling being on TBS, both Saturday and Sunday,

Sunday never once outdrew Saturday night. So we were doing something right. I was fired not for any business reasons whatsoever. It was strictly a personality conflict.

Keller: What have you been up to since?

Dangerously: I've been looking at several different offers. I'm doing some stuff in the Northeast with the ICW. I'm working with Dennis Condrey again. I'm working with Eddie Gilbert's younger brother, Doug, who is more and more like a young Terry Gordy as every day goes by and he is a tremendous talent and a real star of the future and a close, personal friend as well. I enjoy working with Dennis and Doug. There are a lot of projects coming up. There are a lot of options that are available that I'm weighing. I really haven't made up my mind yet as to my next move. As far as my career goes, I guess I'll have to be making that decision shortly. But as for the moment, I'm sitting back and seeing where the cards fall because there's a lot happening in wrestling and what holds true today may not just a couple of weeks from now because so many changes are happening. My contract with the NWA expires February 15 and if I do anything before then with any major organization, any legal squabbles that occur between myself and the NWA would involve any organization that I would go to work for. Anything involving Titan Sports and the WWF will not occur if it ever were to occur before February 15.

Keller: Have you considered returning to the AWA?

Dangerously: That is one of the options that is open. I really haven't made any decisions concerning it. They're not running full-time, so it would have to be in conjunction with other things. Whether I would be willing to return to ESPN, it's one of the options I am considering.

Keller: Do you plan to take legal action against the NWA?

Dangerously: My lawyers and the NWA lawyers have had several conversations. Nothing has been filed in court officially by me or the NWA. Both of our lawyers have had several conversations because I was under contract.

Keller: Your father is a lawyer. Did you ever dream you would become a manager in professional wrestling?

Dangerously: No, no, no. I didn't even dream it. January 2 marked three years since I started. I've really accomplished a lot in three years. To throw all modesty out, I've been really successful in three years and have made some good money and have been at the top. You can't knock success and therefore I have yet to be criticized because I rose to the top pretty rapidly. I always seemed to know what I was doing and where I was going. I always seemed to get favorable write-ups from the critics. I've never been criticized by my

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parents for what I did because I've been successful.

Keller: How did you become editor of the Wrestling Power and Double Action Wrestling magazines at age 19?

Dangerously: I fell into it. Just like the managing, there was a series of circumstances which just fell into place. I had a tremendous streak of luck. I started photographing at Madison Square Garden when I was 12 or 13. I was trading photographs with fans all over the country. Instead of trading all the photographs, I said, "Why don't I get together a bunch of photographs every month and put in the results from the Garden and from the Westchester County Center which is near my house in White Plains, New York, and just trade that and get a couple pictures from everyone. It picked up on circulation and that was in May 1979. I had the guts to go up to Arnold Skaaland and ask for a backstage pass. They gave me a restricted pass. I was allowed to go up to the ring and photograph and go into a limited area of the back. I was only 13 years old. I wasn't allowed to go to the dressing room, but I got interviews with everybody and for the first anniversary issue, Lou Albano set up an interview with the Grand Wizard. It was just the time they did the thing with Pat Patterson turning on Albano and The Grand Wizard because his contract was sold. I asked about where that money went. The Wizard was so impressed that somebody would ask about that when nobody was asking that he invited me down to the Garden backstage and I met Vince McMahon Sr. He asked to see a couple of my photographs and gave me 50 bucks for them. It was great. Fifty bucks cash when you're 13 years old. I hadn't made any cash in the business and he said, "Here you go, kid. Now go up to the ring and take some more pictures for me and show them to me." And every month he'd give me some money. They'd end up in different places. Next thing you know, I'm photographing for Bill Apter and for George Napolitano and I'm making trips to Montreal and Atlanta and I'm writing some stories and just fell

into doing fan clubs and more bulletins and fan clubs and periodical sheets. I took over a couple of magazines that had no circulation. Because I had so many photographs and so many people sending me photographs that when the publisher offered me the job, I jumped at it. It was something I wanted to do and I was very creatively frustrated because I wanted to write more stories than I was at the time. It all fell into place with a lot of luck. I did it for a little over a year before becoming a manager.

Keller: Since then, what promotions have you worked for?

Dangerously: My first month, January 1987, I worked 25 shows in the Northeast for every independent promotion that was up here. Then I went to Florida with one-half of the team (The Motor City Madmen) and we called him Tombstone. That lasted only six weeks before Jim Crockett bought the Florida offices. Then I went to Memphis and I managed Austin Idol and Tommy Rich which was a tremendous boon to my career because we shaved Jerry Lawler's head. I got national attention immediately. From there I went to the AWA which is where a lot of other people were exposed to Paul E. Dangerously and I managed Adorable Adrian Adonis and The Original Midnight Express, Dennis Condrey & Randy Rose. I also became the host of "The Danger Zone" segment on Pro Wrestling This Week. I was in the AWA from July 11, 1987 until just about New Years Eve of that year, just about six months. I left there and went to Southern Championship Wrestling from Georgia which had just opened up. I continued to feud with Tommy Rich there and Randy Rose and Dick Slater and a lot of the other guys were with me. And from there I headed to World Class when I got the call from Eddie Gilbert to go with him to Alabama. Eddie Gilbert and I went into the CWA and were there for five and a half months. From there, I went to the NWA and managed Dennis and Randy which is where I really came onto the national scene.

Keller: For which promotion have you enjoyed working the most?

Dangerously: I really have specific cities and towns that I have very fond memories of. I would be a liar if I didn't say that the NWA was the greatest experience of my career. It was. Hosting the NWA Main Event with Jim Ross and Lance Russell in syndication provided probably the greatest thrills I've had in wrestling because it gave me such creative freedom. There was so much time on air to express views and do imitations and to really just show my stuff. So it was creatively the most fulfilling position I've ever been in.

I have never enjoyed working a town as much as I did Las Vegas. I would say that one of the top two or three moments of my career was when the NWA went back to Las Vegas on November 29.



Paul E. Dangerously and the Dangerous Alliance (Windy City Wrestling, 1989)

Wade Keller

1988 which was a month after I started with the NWA and we brought the Midnight-Midnight feud there. It was the very first Midnight-Midnight match. It was a full eleven months after I had made my last appearance there with the AWA. We went back to the same building where I made my rep which was the Showboat. When Dennis and Randy and I came out to the ring the building shook. The people remembered me and remembered everything we had done there and we got the biggest reaction of the night. It was one of the greatest moments of my life standing on that apron and the whole place was shaking like an earthquake.

Memphis, Tennessee will always have a very warm spot with me because it was where I shaved Jerry Lawler's head and it was my first real experience with negative crowd reaction to that extent. Dothan, Alabama is where Eddie Gilbert and I really cur our teeth in the CWF and probably was the town where we experienced the greatest anger or ire from the fans of any town I've been in.

Each place has its own special place in my memory. Las Vegas especially. It's my favorite place to work.

Keller: Where is the worst place for you?

Dangerously: Cleveland, Ohio. It's because I can't stand the city. I could never stand Cleveland. I hated the airport. I hated the trip to the arena. It was a long ways from where we were staying. I hated the hotel we had to stay in in Cleveland. I don't like the people. I just never liked the town of Cleveland, Ohio.

Keller: Is it true that the SST and you did not

get along well?

Dangerously: The Samoan Swat Team, and this includes the Samoan Savage, too, is one of the most technically superior teams I have ever seen. When they are on, they are the fastest moving, perhaps one of the three or four most effective teams I have ever seen. If I were a fan, they are a team I would definitely want to watch.

My relationship with the Samoans was very difficult because I had come out of a different situation involving The Original Midnight Express which had a different formula than the Samoan Swat Team. I spent the better part of my short career with either Dennis Condrey and Randy Rose or Eddie Gilbert and the formula for working with wrestlers like these is vastly different than with the Samoan Swat Team.

A great manager, and I'm not calling myself a great manager, I'm just saying per se, put with a great wrestler doesn't always mix. And two great wrestlers don't always make a great tag team. The chemistry between Paul E. Dangerously and The Samoan Swat Team was a very difficult mix. It was very hard for me to adapt to their style and very difficult for them to allow my talent at ringside to be showcased. This is not a criticism of either myself or them. They are a tremendously talented tag team, one of the most talented I've ever witnessed. It was great watching them grow as they took on The Midnight Express, The Fantastics, and Eddie Gilbert & Rick Steiner and eventually The Road Warriors. The chemistry was a very difficult mix. I feel the Samoans could have gone further with a different manager. To the same extent, I feel I probably could have helped out another team to a much greater extent.

CRUISE continued from pg. 42

Now that I'm with the NWA, maybe I should think of some bad things to say about the WWF, and there are a lot of bad things to say, but my personal experience was one of a very professional organization that was very concerned—overly concerned—with its image.

You know, I started the day after the Stossel piece aired on 20/20. I started and that morning we were inundated, absolutely inundated. Of course, our response was "no comment." I was sickened by (the feature). The fact is, you can say just about anything about these guys (wrestlers) and they're just not going to respond physically. That's just not their style. So when Dr. D did that, I was really sickened. It's like me hitting a ten year old kid. But that blew away in three or four days.

Keller: How do you see newsletters viewed by wrestlers?

Cruise: I haven't got a sense of that yet. The official position is that newsletters are not acceptable to the business. Of course, unofficially everybody reads them. I'll admit I find them fascinating. I'll tell you one quote. I have heard people in the NWA call them parasites. There are some people who feel very strongly about that. Then there are some wrestlers who will read them openly. I think the important question is not whether they're acceptable, but the level of influence they have. That's something I haven't been able to gauge. If you're any kind of a businessman, you're going to read the trade journals of your industry. I enjoy reading them.

Keller: What do you think of the current and questioned direction in which the NWA has been moving?

Cruise: I think what concerns me the most is people not giving the NWA enough time. The WWF with its huge staff and with its huge effort should be ten times bigger than the NWA and draw ten times the numbers the NWA does. I don't think it does. If you go to the smaller towns and see these rabid enthusiastic fans, you see that America still thirsts for real wrestling. The only time I hear things about the NWA on its last legs is in the newsletters. I think the fighting between bookers and management is going to happen regardless and I'm not sure that it exists now, to be honest with you. But there has to be a natural antagonism built in there unless you're the booker and manager the same. I have not seen internal dissention. Wade, I'm not saying everything is roses there. As the company grows and as it expands, there's going to be a lot of people who don't like the direction of the organization. I'm talking about any company. But the programming that we produce is so vital. We're on more than 160 stations on World Wide. We have three syndicated hours and four TBS hours a week. It's very vital, important programming to the SuperStation. It brings in good money and good ratings.

PAUL E. DANGEROUSLY

Paul Heyman, known as Paul E. Dangerously in the world of pro wrestling, and simply "Paul E." to his friends, has been considered a big part of wrestling's future by just about everyone who has crossed his path over the last ten years. He went from ringside photographer to executive producer in ten years. However, he is executive producer of a wrestling promotion that has yet to run its first event, that can't legally align itself with its inevitable lead promoter, Jim Crockett, until November, and that cancelled its first two scheduled dates for television tapings. Despite curiosity about and anticipation of the debut of this new proposed national promotion, scepticism has grown in the last week. In this, "Torch Talk" with Dangerously, he explains what went into the decision to postpone WWN's pilot taping and specifies what his immediate plans are for the promotion. Also, Dangerously specifies how WWN will be different from other promotions and offers a list of his top five "draft picks" if he could bring any five wrestlers to WWN at its onset. This interview was conducted by telephone from Dangerously's home in Scarsdale, N.Y. on July 26, 1993.



Paul E. Dangerously

Wade Keller: Explain why the pilot WWN tapings were cancelled last weekend?

Dangerously: What happened is quite simple. I did a site survey of the building we were going to use for the first taping in Austin, Tex. It's not uncommon to do a site survey two or three weeks out of the chute. I did the site survey. After looking at the building and consulting with my pyrotechnics guy and the guy who was going to do the laser lights, it was my recommendation to the company not to do the initial taping in this particular building because according to the experts who were there, and in my opinion, the building was unsuitable for what we wanted to do. Could we have put on a wrestling show that would resemble WCW shoots in Gainesville, Ga.? Yeah. Could we have dressed the building up nice and come off with a really nice looking product? Yeah. We could have.

But if we ran that building, we weren't going to come out of the chute with something so spectacular, so mind-bogglingly different that it would capture the attention of the station managers. And that was the purpose of shooting the pilot. The buck stops with me, though. There's no finger pointing. I stand by the decision. It was the right decision to make. It was a mature decision. I didn't want to do it wrong. You keep the baby in the womb, the baby's protected. Once you bring the baby out of the womb, if it's got a cold, you've got to wipe its nose with a tissue. If it has a cut, you have to put a band-aid on it. You have to take care of it the rest of its life. As long as you keep the baby in the womb and you don't deliver it until it's time, the baby stays protected.

Keller: What would you have done to make it so mind-boggling? What more can be done with wrestling television that the WWF hasn't already done?

Dangerously: To be honest with you, they do some really innovative stuff with the video screens. We had a video screen; it was 16 screens. We were going to have fireworks, laser lights. The entrances were going to be spectacular. If a big victory were to take place, there would be a huge celebration with fireworks and laser lights, etcetera. To me, the best produced wrestling shows I've ever seen were the Saturday Night's Main Events. If you watched them, you always had the feeling you were watching something special.

Keller: How would you avoid running the risk of coming off as being gaudy or making a big deal out of something occurring that is rather conventional for wrestling?

Dangerously: Because it wasn't going to be just anybody walking down the aisle and getting this type of entrance. There were a lot of times on our format sheet that we were opening up in the ring. It was going to be the major players who would have spectacular entrances. After watching the Flair vs. Steamboat match from

Chicago, Flair's entrance was so spectacular that by the time that bell rang, everybody knew they were watching something special.

Keller: What are station managers going to look at? For instance, is it of value to have quality Japan-style wrestling as part of the pilot taping?

Dangerously: I think it's very important. It's one of the components that makes up a quality wrestling television production in the 1990s. The thing is, I called off this taping—and it was my decision, and the buck stops with me. I called off this taping because there was a malfunction in the system. That malfunction could have happened if I didn't feel the talent was right—which happened in June and we postponed the taping because we didn't feel we had the right mix when Hawk's Japan dates were changed. There was a malfunction in the system so we delayed the tapings. If I wasn't happy with the camera crew that was being brought in, that's a malfunction. If I wasn't happy with the technical director, that's a malfunction. If I wasn't happy with the entrances, or the guy handling that, or the rampway that was being built, or the laser lights, or the pyrotechnics. If there was anything I felt wasn't above the present standards, that's a malfunction. That's something we have to address. The production obviously is something that has to be first class. But quality wrestling is very important because once you get past the station managers, you have to appeal to the wrestling audience.

Keller: Everybody who proposes a new promotion says they're going to be different. Joe Pedicino talked big, saying he was going to have a stage next to the ring—and he ended up sort of with a stage—and he was going to have spectacular entrances, cheerleaders in the ring, and a lot of other stuff to make the GWF different. He was going to do wrestling like we had never seen it before. He had a lot of good ideas. It just never fully came through, despite his big talk at the beginning. Are you concerned you're running that same risk with the way you've been talking about this new effort as being completely different?

Dangerously: Sure, and the criticism is 100 percent bonafide. There's only one way I can argue against us being labeled in the same fashion. We called off the taping because it wasn't going to be right. To be very honest with you, I could have made a lot of money in the next six months, and so could a lot of other people, by just milking this thing through. In six months, when it fell on its face, because we didn't come out of the chute in winning form, I could have done a lot of finger-pointing: "Hey, I'm just the booker," "It's this guy's fault," "It's this guy's responsibility." That's bullsh--. I saw the building, I saw it wasn't up to par. I thought we couldn't produce the product that we had in mind, that we had envisioned. I said we're not going to make all of these claims and then come

out of it with just another wrestling product. It would have never gotten past any station managers. It would have gone into the garbage.

Keller: What comes next? If a show isn't rescheduled in September or October, people are going to think it will be six or nine months, or never come off. Is that possible?

Dangerously: First of all, if it were six to nine months, I don't see where there's a problem in that. I did an interview with Mike Mooneyham in the *Charleston Post and Courier* and he was addressing the situation of hopefully Jim Crockett being involved in this project as of November 1 when his contract with WCW expires. My comment to him was, "We're going to do this right because we're going to take our time doing it." If this were to take six to nine months to set up, what's wrong with that? These time constraints in this business are what's killed so many different efforts. We're not going to set deadlines. We haven't signed a commitment to a single cable company or TV station yet.

Keller: Are you working on another TV date?

Dangerously: We are going to run Ft. Hood because we made commitments to the talent and I don't want to be in a situation in a month, six months, or in a year where I call somebody up and ask them to work for me and they say, "You screwed me on those two dates. No way."

Keller: So you're paying everyone for both nights or just one night?

Dangerously: They're making the equivalent of what they would have made for both nights.

Keller: Is that the same for the pyrotechnics workers and the announcers and the production people?

Dangerously: The production has been cancelled. If the up-front deal was there and there was a deposit, then we have lost the deposit. If there wasn't a deposit or people were working with us for a percentage of the action in the future—that was part of the deal; that's how we were able to afford this—then they're on hold, too. People were consulted before this decision was made final. I made sure everybody understood our reasons and pretty much stayed on the phones with them until they not only understood, but once everybody saw what the situation was, they pretty much all agreed. This was not done on a whim or out of temper or hot-headedness. I consulted these people. The HDTV people had their tape measures out seeing if they could place cameras here and block out this for camera angles. We spent several hours in the building.

Keller: Are you working on another date for a pilot taping?

Dangerously: We're going to run Ft. Hood and after Ft. Hood we're going to evaluate what we did right and what we did wrong. We're going to

The Zahorian trial and then all the things that came out with the Hulk Hogan scenario on Arsenio and you go down that list, it hurt their business and it hurt them severely. It created a hole they had to dig themselves out of. Then their ratings got decimated. They went right into the graveyard.

take a step back and see what we can do better. After that short period of self-evaluation, we will have to decide what our next move will be and hopefully that will be to decide to do another television taping.

Keller: So it is possible after the house show a decision could be made to shut down?

Dangerously: No. The project's not dead. We cancelled it because there was one problem. Everything else was in order. We've done what would be equivalent in another business to a systems check. The talent was there. The production company was there. The post-production facilities were there. The money was there. The lighting was there. Everything was there except for the appropriate venue.

Keller: When you visualize the World Wrestling Network in two years, where do you see it? What would you like the day-to-day operations to entail?

Dangerously: I'd like it to be alive in two years, up and running in two years. I don't want to put any unrealistic goals on it. Again, that's putting a timetable on it. Where would I like it in the future? Obviously, you shoot for the moon and see how far you can get. You always want your own project to be the leader in the industry, number one in ratings and house show revenue and merchandising and pay-per-view and this, that, and the other. Is that a realistic goal? I don't know. There's a lot of things happening in this business. We could win it just by default.

Keller: What of the above list of possible areas of success will be the initial major concentration of WWN?

Dangerously: House shows. It's becoming an open market again in this country. It's something that everybody else is pulling away from, so therefore the door is wide open.

Keller: What will it take to draw fans to arenas again in this country? What can you do that's different or better than what the WWF

does?

Dangerously: I think the WWF was so shell-shocked by declining ratings and by the bottoming out of the business in this country that to climb out of that hole puts them at a disadvantage. When we start on level ground, we have a distinct advantage in that we don't have to climb out of the hole they are in. Somewhere along the line, they lost the interest of the public. They were so hammered by their scandals that obviously it hurt their business. I was one of the very few proponents of the Hulk Hogan-Sgt. Slaughter scenario. I never criticized it. I never saw a lot wrong with it. I always thought it was just wrestling. But in the long run, all of the mainstream criticism and then the Zahorian trial and then all the things that came out with the Hulk Hogan scenario on Arsenio and you go down that list, it hurt their business and it hurt them severely. It created a hole they had to dig themselves out of. Then their ratings got decimated. They went right into the graveyard, so they had to address that situation. I think Monday Night Raw is the best wrestling show on television today. The only problem is, I don't really see right now Monday Night Raw being geared toward drawing revenue from arena presentations. I see it as being a ratings-getter.

Keller: You need ratings to get fan interest in house shows. How do you play both games at once?

Dangerously: You have to turn your TV show into pretty much an infomercial.

Keller: Why would people watch an infomercial when Monday Night Raw is available?

Dangerously: Because if you make your infomercial as entertaining as Monday Night Raw, if you have the same quality workrate, if you have larger than life personalities, if you have the entertainment value that Monday Night Raw does, people will watch it.

Keller: If it were that easy, why wouldn't the WWF be doing an infomercial version of Raw right now that wouldn't give away as much on television?

Dangerously: They might soon. I think the first thing they had to do was reestablish the show. I don't know their grand scheme of things. I'm not in on their discussions. Maybe they're not in a rush either. Maybe they're saying, "We're going to get this show to be as hot as hell, by December it should peak, and once we get it up there, let's just bang those house shows out from that show." I mean, they might have taken that attitude. I don't know. They're doing Monday Night Raw so well, I would assume they know why it's successful and what it's going to take to make other departments in their business successful. I think right now what they had to address was their ratings problem and they've addressed that on one particular show. I don't know the ratings

for Superstars of Wrestling, although I should, but I'd assume they're trying to get those ratings up, too. Once they reach a certain point or a timetable, they'll move on and address other situations. This could be just step-one in their overall business plan.

Keller: Will the WWN tailor its style of wrestling to any particular region of the country in order to have a better chance at establishing television concentration wherever the WWN ends up running arena events?

Paul E. Dangerously: That's a hell of a question. I think wrestling in the way it has been presented for several years has always geared itself toward a specific demographic. If, in my opinion, you try to appeal to a broader based audience and try to maintain that you are hip, that you are irreverent, that you are entertaining, that this is what is in, even though the markets may be different and the personality of the region of the country might be different, if you keep a certain profile on your product, it will appeal in all sectors of the country.

Keller: If you could transfer the audience of any TV show, what show would that be?

Dangerously: I wouldn't.

Keller: What comes closest?

Dangerously: It doesn't, but I'll explain to you why. In 1988, when I was working with Windy City, the one thing that I really concentrated on doing was giving the people in Chicago a diverse mix. The thrill of variety not the agony of repeat. We gave them the old-style Bruiser-Crusher brawls, we gave them a little bit of the AWA wrestling technique, we gave them some of the mid-'80s Mid-Atlantic bloodbaths and 40 minute title matches, we gave them some of the old-style WWF, we even gave them some of the new-style WWF with what was hot then—Hulk Hogan and larger-than-life personalities. There was something for everybody there. If I were to compare our vision with any other kind of genre, I would say what I would like it to be is a 24 hour music channel that does not limit itself to one particular style of music. And this is something also that I feel we can learn from the music industry since wrestling has been trying to associate itself with the music industry ever since wrestlers started coming out to the ring to music and then of course in '84 with the "Rock and Wrestling Connection." How come country music sells albums in New York? How come rap is in the suburbs now? Rap is supposed to be this inner-city urban catharsis, meanwhile there are suburban white affluent college-bound kids listening to it. Why? Because it appeals to them. It's no longer just marketed toward a specific demographic because the message in the music is, "Hey! You don't have to be inner-city minority and poor to listen and understand this message." I think wrestling can be presented in

the same way. Sure, some of this is New York irreverence. A lot of this has to do with my New York upbringing, but that doesn't mean somebody in Alabama can't identify with it, or somebody in Los Angeles won't get the point, or someone in Texas will say, "I don't get it. That's northern style rasslin'." It's not.

Keller: You want to appeal, then, to all types of people in every part of the country who are potential wrestling fans?

Dangerously: If there is any particular group of individuals that I am looking to go a little further to appeal to, it's going to be the MTV crowd. I don't mean what Vince (McMahon Jr.) tried to do in 1984 because the MTV crowd never truly went to wrestling. And I'll back that up. When the WWF presented the Wendi Richter vs. Fabulous Moolah with Lou Albano and Cyndi Lauper in the corners, Madison Square Garden did not sell out. I think there were 14,000 or 16,000 people there, but it did not sell out. The MTV crowd never went to wrestling. What the WWF said is, "We have to become mainstream to do Wrestlemania, to get Hulk Hogan across to the entire country, to get Roddy Piper over. We need to go mainstream, get our wrestlers in *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Inside Sports*, we need them in the gossip pages of the newspaper. We need to be accepted by the mainstream media." And they couldn't get it done. It was impossible. So what did they do? They exploited MTV because anything on MTV is hip, it's happening, it's now, it's today, it's what's hot. As soon as they got on MTV, everybody in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Sports*



Paul E. Dangerously

Wade Keller

Illustrated, and everybody else said, "Hey, wrestling's on MTV, wrestling must be hot, wrestling must be hip, wrestling must be today. This is the in-thing because it's on MTV." So they exploited MTV to get across to the rest of the mainstream media. It was genius. But the MTV crowd never really got into it. I want Fox-TV's audience. I want "In Living Color's" audience, I want "Married with Children's" audience, I want "The Simpson's" audience. I want the "90210" crowd. Anybody who turns on TV and goes, "Hey, the coolest guy on TV today is the Burger King guy," that's the group of individuals I am going to target more than any other because I don't think they've ever been targeted by a wrestling promotion and these are the guys today who decide what's hip, what's in, what's happening. We even had a personality who was much like the Burger King guy and had all of the hip phrases and was going to open up a lot of our shows.

Keller: Would you run the risk of appearing like the wrestling version was a cheap imitation of the real thing? Any time wrestling leaves its element, it runs the risk of coming off as not being genuine.

Dangerously: It all depends on how it's presented. If you present it as a carbon copy, people are going to say it's a carbon copy. To this day, I think one of the most effective videos done was the Earthquake-Hulk Hogan video done by the WWF. That was done to music. Did anybody sit there and accuse the WWF of being like a group on MTV? No. Everybody was astonished this year by the quality of "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan's music video. Nobody sat there and said, "Awe, they're just trying to be like a rock 'n' roll group. Everybody was enthralled by the production quality and got into the video. It was first class all the way. I think if you do things first class, I think people will appreciate it. The personality we were going to present was called "Matty in the House" and he is a very MTV-style on-air personality. Someone like him has not been presented on a wrestling show. He was only going to be on 45 seconds a week. His longest segment was scheduled for 1 minute, 15 seconds in which he was going to interview "The Wrestling School Dropout." I think the guy was so hip and so cool, he would have appealed to some people who wouldn't normally watch wrestling. I think there would be a group of viewers who would watch our show specifically to see him, to hear the cool phrases. I think I would have broadened our audience.

Keller: How will the WWN differ in terms philosophy on the style from matches presented by the WWF and WCW?

Dangerously: I really don't have a problem with a lot of wrestling on television, I have a problem with the way it's presented. We have learned from the mistakes that have been made. I don't think anybody wants to hear the wo-

"We gotta go!" anymore. We certainly wouldn't be giving you those words unless it's really appropriate and it's done to entice the viewers. The original theory behind "We gotta go!" is to make fans pay to see the match. Give them a little taste of it and they'll want to see it. It probably worked the first week. But then it was done every week. It's like a disqualification in a title match. If it's done once a year, you're going to do a lot of money on the return match. If you do it every month, people are going to feel ripped off. "We gotta go!" is a good idea once, twice a year, not 30 times a year. All of the things that have been played out in this industry we honestly had to evaluate. All of things we have knocked, that I have personally knocked for six years saying, "This is the type of thing that kills your business," we weren't going to do it. We were going to leave people in cliff hangers, but they would be intriguing cliff hangers, not "We gotta go!" One of the things wrestling forgot how to do is how to entice fans to want more. They satisfied their appetite at times. I'm not trying to satisfy their appetite, I'm trying to whet their appetite. The product, without tipping our hands to what we're going to do, was being specifically designed to whet the appetite, not satisfy it, with a concern for not pissing off the fans, too.

Keller: What about cable and pay-per-view?

Dangerously: That is a business decision that's not in my hands and is more in the hands of the people who will have a financial interest in the company. I have my own specific views. I think it could be a conflict of interest, then again it puts you on national TV right away. Bingo, everybody has a chance to see you. Then, a year later, you could go into syndication and everybody's going to know your product. Then you target specific markets. That's one pro to it. The con is, how do you promote a cable special on your local stations? Doesn't that conflict with getting people to watch your syndicated show?

Keller: Did syndicated Cheers while the new Cheers were running create a conflict of interest?

Dangerously: David Letterman thought it was a real conflict of interest. Keenan Ivory Wayans walked off of his own show, "In Living Color," because he didn't want it repeated on Thursday night. Why? Number one, it's oversaturation of the product, which has been a problem in wrestling for a long time. Number two, how is a station manager at a local channel going to feel when he listens to the show and hears, "This Wednesday on national TV (which, of course, means cable), don't forget to tune in to the big main event because this guy is going to defend the world title against that guy?" I think the station manager would rather hear, "Tune in this week to this very station." One of the things we did, and I'm very proud of this, is that once we completed the scheduling of the three-hour television taping,

we played devil's advocate and we intentionally went against everything we had planned. Sometimes you realize you may have been insensitive in some area for a long time.

Keller: Would the WWN ever be able to compete with a national promotion in terms of revenue if the WWN weren't promoting pay-per-view events?

Dangerously: Sure. If pay-per-view becomes so oversaturated as it appears to be headed, whatever revenue is derived from that, it's going to kill their arena business. I don't see pay-per-view helping the arena business. It never has. There is no history of it. There is no precedent set where they came out of a pay-per-view and business boomed! There might be an isolated incident or two, but there's no direct correlation. The more pay-per-views being done by other companies, the more the arena business is being left wide open. Arena business is not necessarily the answer, but it's something right now that is being left open.

Keller: What about international markets?

Dangerously: Very interesting. And a key to our success. We are exploring those options already and we are anxiously awaiting our demo tape so we can start doing business overseas. There was a time when this promotion was being discussed at first that we were going to spend our first year or two exclusively overseas. We have not ruled out that option, but it's the opinion of a lot of people who have given this company really good advice that the house show business in this country is wide open. The United States and Japan have been milking this cow a long, long time and there's virgin territory all over the world. A lot of these people would love to see live wrestling because the television is already there. The WWF is on in the Philippines. WCW is on in a lot of overseas markets. So was the AWA when it was around. These guys are on TV and they are perceived as television stars.

Keller: Given all of the above statements, if you could choose any five wrestlers to base a new promotion around, which five wrestlers would you choose? You can hotshot with big stars or build with future stars.

Dangerously: This is off the top of my head. The first five that come to mind for me in no particular order are Road Warrior Hawk, Steve Austin, Shawn Michaels, Arn Anderson, and Sting. With asterisks, I would add Rick Rude, Brian Pillman, and Bobby Eaton.

Keller: Why not, for instance, Ric Flair or Ted DiBiase for experience and recognition? Why not "Undertaker" Mark Callous whom you've been so high on in the past?

Dangerously: I'm very high on the Undertaker. I'd love to have him, but just as far as top draft picks right now at this very moment, maybe it's my reasoning behind wanting these other people.

I chose Road Warrior Hawk because you can build a lot around him. Sting, because with the possible exception of Hawk, there is not one person in this country today who could conceivably fill Hulk Hogan's shoes. And Sting is the one guy with enough charisma, with enough going for him, and after his matches against Rude and Vader, has enough ring savvy now, Sting could do it.

Keller: Why Hawk? Critics would say Hawk has limited ability, or at least limited ambitions in the ring, and as a singles wrestler he hasn't proven himself.

Dangerously: He hasn't had the opportunity yet. He hasn't been put to the test yet. He, right now, is so hungry to prove himself, it's like he's starting over again. This guy is so credible and the people believe in him. Let's put it this way, if either Hawk or Sting walked off that helicopter and slammed Yokozuna, I would predict a monster buyrate for SummerSlam.

Keller: Why Anderson instead of, say, a DiBiase? Because you know Anderson personally?

Dangerously: It could be. I wouldn't do it for personal reasons. There are people in that group I named that I don't get along with personally. It's the same reason I didn't name Big Van Vader in that group. I think Vader is miles ahead of anybody right now, deserves that world heavyweight championship, and is more the man than Ric Flair is. When a man that size does a moonsault with a blown out back, when a man that size does the things he does and is willing to do for other people, that impresses me a lot more than when a 230 pound guy does it. Anybody who knows Arn Anderson is fully aware of just how much he understands this business, and he understands this business as much as anybody I've ever met. Rick Rude because he takes pride in how hard he works. There are a million reasons to use Rude, but that's the main reason. He rolls up his sleeves every night. Shawn Michaels because he is by far, right now, in my opinion, the best wrestler in the world today. Steve Austin because he's someday going to blow Michaels right out of that position.

Keller: Would wrestlers from Japan be high on your list?

Dangerously: I would love to have Akira Nogami, I would love to have Muta. There are a lot of pros and cons to using Konnan. I'm not just looking at the available talent in the United States. We were excited because we wanted to bring the Japanese style of women's wrestling over here. I'm still determined to do that. It's a very athletic high-impact style. The concept we had in mind involved Madusa and one of the Jumping Bomb Angels. I saw a tape of a boxing match Madusa had with Aja Kong that scared the hell out of me. Any man who watches that match will have respect for both of those talents.

TED DIBIASE

In the following "Torch Talk," Ted DiBiase talks about the injuries that have kept him out of the ring since fall and may prevent him from ever returning to the ring. DiBiase left the WWF after SummerSlam last August, hoping for a change of scenery in Japan, where he was injured. This interview was conducted Feb. 11, 1994.

Keller: Pain from your injury aside, how has it been adjusting to being at home rather than on the road?

DiBiase: I put a lot of years in. These last four months, outside of three weeks in California and a few other days away, I've been home. That's the longest I've ever been home. I've gotten to know my wife again. I've done some serious bonding with my kids. I've been able to go to their soccer games and go hunting with them and do some things I had done before, but not to the extent that I can now. I am enjoying it very much.

Keller: Are you missing the wrestling business?

DiBiase: Yes and no. If I could climb back in the ring healthy and wrestle a Ric Flair or a Bret Hart or a Terry Funk, I would. One of the last matches I had, which is kind of ironic or sentimental in a way, was at an independent show with Terry Funk. It was a joy. It was so

comfortable, so easy, so natural.

Keller: Did your injury result from something pretty unusual or was it a typical bump that just hit wrong?

DiBiase: Actually, it was like a year before I went out that I first was injured. In February of last year, I was getting these shooting pains in my left arm when I was taking bumps. I had an MRI done then and they said I had a herniated disk. You wrestle every night. I can't pinpoint exactly when it started bothering me. It was like gradual. I would take a bump and I would just get a little shot. A few days would go by and every now and then I would get a little shot. Then it would be stronger. Eventually it was killing me. I was off four to six weeks before Wrestlemania last year. And I came back, and my first day back was Wrestlemania in Vegas. I wrestled April, May, June, July, right through SummerSlam. And I was flying on that first trip to Japan in September and went back in October and on the third day of the tour, boom, I tell you what it was.

I got whipped into the corner and Bossman was there. It was that deal where he charges you with the big splash in the corner. And when he did, it kind of whipped my head back and I got that shot of pain. And after that, every night—not every bump—but it would hit me. By the time the match was over, my arm was throbbing and my hand was numb. It would gradually come back. Like an idiot I stayed the whole tour. I should have left then. I eventually had a second MRI done. It confirmed the same thing. The disk was herniated. A year ago it was the left side. Now it's the right side. I found out the disk was herniated on both sides, still predominantly the left side. Who's to say. You have neck pain. You get the chiropractic adjustment. I had no idea I had a problem with my neck. The pain wasn't in my neck, the pain was actually down my arm from my shoulder. I didn't know where it was coming from. I knew when I tilted my head back to one side or another, I had pain. I thought maybe it was coming from my neck. It took me a while to figure out.

I don't think it was any one thing. It could be the result of years of being piledriven and being dropped on my head or just taking a bump from my feet to my back. Because when you take that bump, you land on your shoulders with your head forward, right on those fifth and sixth vertebrae right at the base of your neck which is the top of your shoulders, so who knows, maybe I damaged it some way and it finally gave.

Keller: Have you had fewer injuries than average?

DiBiase: Probably pretty typical. I was pretty fortunate, in fact, right up until the end. Then bang. That's why I'm sitting here talking on the phone and off the road right now. It's this thing with my neck. I'm still debating whether to have surgery. Either way I don't think it would be

good for me to think about wrestling again. They said I could rehab for a year and probably become pain free, but every doctor, every physical therapist says should I go back to wrestle, within six months I'll be back where I am now with the bulging disk and in pain.

If I can become pain free and avoid the surgery and not wrestle anymore, then that's what I think I should do. The other option is the surgery. I guess there have been a couple of guys who have actually tried to wrestle after having the surgery and they're nuts. I've had two very good neurologists tell me, "You might be able to do it and try to be careful, but you take the wrong bump or you just continue to bump and everything and somebody drops you on your head, one wrong bump, and you're a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down." I wouldn't take that chance.

Keller: Do you expect, then, that you probably won't return to the ring?

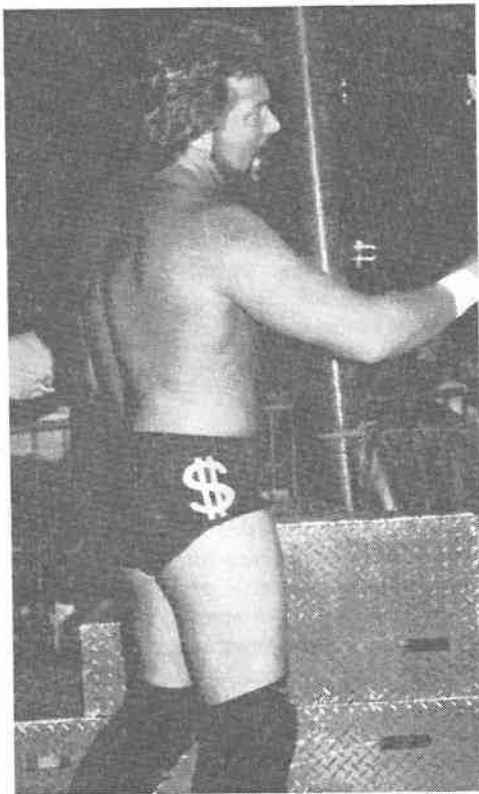
DiBiase: I'll never say never. I've learned to say over the years to never say never. Thank goodness my wife talked me into spending the money to take out this Lloyds of London disability policy which is very good. Gosh, it's almost better than working. I'm not making the money I was making, but I'm not doing bad with it. It's affording me time to seek out some of those other things.

Keller: For how long do you collect?

DiBiase: Two full years, and then a big balloon payment. Right before the last pay-per-view, the WWF contacted me and said, "Ted, would you like to come do the color commentary with Vince on the Royal Rumble?" I said sure. And that was something totally new to me. And I've had nothing but good reports from a lot of people who thought I did a great job. There's a strong possibility I'll be doing more of that. Nothing's set in stone yet, but there's been some talk. Again, timing is everything. If it works out right, maybe I'll be there. I would like that. I would like very much to continue, maybe not on a full-time basis, but on a part time basis to have some role in the business. I still love the business. I don't want to see it go by the wayside, I don't want to see it die. It comes and it goes, it has peaks and valleys. It always has. I would like to see it go on and I would like to be part of it in some way.

Keller: Are you interested in promoting, booking, or being a road agent?

DiBiase: I don't know that I want to be on the road that much ever again. I've pretty much had my fill of that. I don't know. Promote? No. I don't want to promote because it's such a headache. I mean, I don't know. I'm not made strong enough to do that. I have a life. I have a wife and three beautiful kids. I want to enjoy my kids before they're grown and gone. If I've said it



Ted DiBiase

Wade Keller

once, I've said it hundreds of times to Vince. "I don't know how you do it. I don't know how." He's one of those workaholic type of people. He just thrives on go, go, go, go, go, go, go. I take my hat off to him. I mean, sure we can get nickled and dimed, and I haven't always agreed with Vince. Whoever always agrees with their boss?

Keller: Has it been different for your sons having you on the road compared to how it was for you as a kid with your father on the road?

DiBiase: It's different in some ways, but in a lot of ways it's the same. Dad is gone, whether he's 100 miles away or 1000 miles away, he's gone. My father would always come home a couple of times a week, even for a short time. A lot of times he would go in the evening and come home that night. A lot of it was driving and it was very regional. And there were times he would go to Japan and be gone for five or six weeks. He was still gone a lot. With my boys, I guess growing up like that, you become accustomed to what your life is. My oldest son didn't live with me until he was 13. So we're making up for lost time and it's worked out very well. He lived with his mother until he was old enough to make the decision. He's been with us and it's worked out great. My other two boys have always known me to be there and be gone. Just now, they're just getting used to me being home.

Keller: And they're realizing what they were missing?

DiBiase: We all do, in a way. It was understood. I live where I live in Mississippi because my in-laws live here. I have great in-laws. My father-in-law has filled in wonderfully. He was the one who has been here and able to do on a regular basis what I've only been available to do periodically from time to time when time allowed. Like taking them hunting and taking them fishing. It's not how much time is spent, it's what I do with the time I have. And I'm very close to all of my sons. I don't come from that school of "boys don't cry and men don't cry, and you don't hug and kiss." We're a very affectionate family. To me, if a guy doesn't cry and can't show his emotions, he's not a man. That's the way I feel about it. That's the way I was raised. I hugged and kissed my dad every day until the day he died. And all of my boys do, too. We're very close.

Kids are smart. After a while, they know I'm going and I'm not gone because I want to be away from them. I'm gone because I have to go to work. They learn that. When they're really little, it's hard. We went through periods with them when they were little when I'd be gone and they didn't understand. But as they get older, they understand why you're gone. You explain to them about paying the bills. "You want toys, you want to eat?" (laughs) It's what you do with the

He's one of those workaholic type of people. He just thrives on go, go, go, go, go, go, go. I take my hat off to him. I mean, sure we can get nickled and dimed, and I haven't always agreed with Vince. Whoever always agrees with their boss?

time when you are there. When you only have that short period of time when you come home and your son wants you to go play ball or wants you to come to the game, and you go, "I'm sorry son, but I want to lay on the couch and watch TV and relax," kids will notice. A kid knows when he is loved. They know when you come home, you only have two days, yet instead of doing what you wanted to do—like you just got off the plane and you're tired—instead of going home and crashing, you go out and drive across town and stay up a little longer to catch that game. It's quality time. I've had that with my sons.

Your wife can always find things to blast you about, but the one thing my wife tells everybody is what a good dad I am. And I take a lot of pride in that. We downplay my business. The way they handle me being gone is handled well. They don't like me being gone. They'd like me to be there, but they understand. And they understand and they appreciate the time we do have. And it's made this time we've had together now all the better. Now we're more relaxed about it.

Keller: Are they as interested in wrestling as you were as a kid?

DiBiase: No, not at all. We just downplay it so much. My kids go to school and naturally they get asked questions. "What's it like being a wrestler's kid?" They'll start asking them questions about wrestling and my boys go, "Look, what does your dad do for a living? Do you know what he does all day? Do you know the intricacies of his business." Naturally, I know it's a different type of job, but again, that's the point they're trying to make, that it's his job. They don't turn the TV on every week to catch every show because it's just my job. Since they've grown up in it, they've seen me wrestle. If it's something special, if it's Wrestlemania, if it's a big show, if it's an interview on Arsenio Hall, or something out of the ordinary, then yeah they're going to watch it. But otherwise, hey, when I'm on the road ten days and wrestle ten times, I can't tell you what I did on the first day. They handle it well.

Keller: They don't have much interest in

getting into the business?

DiBiase: The two oldest ones haven't shown interest. I think maybe my little one has gotten more into the matches and having the dolls and all that stuff, but basically he's following his older brothers. All of them are very into soccer. Each of them has gone on the road with me once or twice, just to see what it's like. My little one went when he was four and he loved it. Because it was just him and me, he wanted to do it again. It was great for all of us. They had a chance to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and have to get to an airport and an airplane into the next town and then dad's got to go to the gym, and then he's got to eat, and he's got to take a nap, and maybe get in another car and drive another 150 miles. They're going, "Wow, you do this every day?!" That's a good education. It makes them appreciate it a little more.

DUKES continued from pg. 53

pullin' more toward Calgary right now.

Keller: What your long-term dreams in pro wrestling?

Dukes: Well, to me, it's funny. Over the years, I've talked to a lot of blacks in wrestling. Junkyard Dog, Thunderbolt Patterson, and a lot of them want to be the first black—this, the first black—that. That's not my point. Mine is to make a fair share of the money. That's just my goal in professional wrestling. Be the best I can be and make money. Learn the wrestling business a little more and maybe down the line there'll be titles. But at this point I've had a few nonsense titles. I guess it can help your career getting titles, but I'm going to work on my game a little.

Keller: If you were to quit wrestling right now, what do you think you would do?

Dukes: After the Rochester incident with the AWA I wanted to totally quit because it was really silly. I got the heat for everything and they really didn't see my point in the argument and I thought I had a good point. But, I figure if I do quit, I've got some things going with some bodyguards for, like, Prince, Janet Jackson. I know a guy who's got a set up with that. Many sergeants want me to (become a police officer) but I don't want to get into that line of work. My dad was a cop and he didn't seem happy with it.

Keller: What's the most embarrassing moment of your career?

Dukes: One time we were doing a Jerry Lewis Wrestle-a-thon. I went to jump over the top rope and my foot got caught. It got tangled up in the rope and it was the most hilarious thing I've seen. After that I was a little sceptical if I could jump over the top rope.

Keller: On the flip side, what is the proudest moment of your career?

Dukes: I'd have to say maybe at SuperClash. The bigness of the event, the hype, and so forth. Also that was a high point, having the tag titles, if only for one night.

SHANE DOUGLAS

Shane Douglas, formerly one half of the Dynamic Dudes, left the NWA on not-so-good terms with management. He is currently wrestling across the country for independent promoters. He recently wrestled for the WWF and has been negotiating with the AWA. The following "Torch Talk" conducted in person at an independent card in Hinkley, Minn. on May 28, 1989 just minutes before he wrestled Larry Cameron. In this "Torch Talk," Douglas discusses his feelings on Jim Herd and his former promotion, the NWA.

Wade Keller: Under what circumstances did you leave the NWA?

Shane Douglas: I left the NWA under good circumstances with the wrestlers that were involved there and under bad circumstances with management. I didn't agree with the philosophy they were taking. I think today we can't ignore the fact that fans want to see entertainment and that means they want to see snakes and they want to see birds as well as they want to see dropkicks and suplexes. We've got to give it all to them. It's a circus now. You wouldn't want to go to the circus and find out the fat lady wasn't there when you paid to see the fat lady and you wouldn't want to go to the circus if there was no flying trapeze act, and so on. I think at the NWA that's what they were trying to do. And a guy named Jim Herd I think is the worst boss in professional

wrestling. He is trying to make the wrestling pure wrestling—armbars and holds and nothing more than that, and people don't want to see that.

Keller: What are some of the more specific things Jim Herd has done to make himself the worst boss in pro wrestling?

Douglas: Aside from the fact that he's trying to take the stress off the entertainment aspect of it, he's made very poor business decisions. One of which would be getting rid of some of the tag teams like The Steiners and splitting them up, one of the best tag teams in the world. Splitting up Tom Zenk and Brian Pillman. Splitting up The Dynamic Dudes. Not giving Luger a fair chance at the World Title and the bullsh-- of the Horsemen getting involved in every match. That's just plain crap. The people don't want to see that anymore. Those were all Jim Herd's decisions.

Decisions to bring in people like the Junkyard Dog and replace Lex Luger with Junkyard Dog. Come on, you can ask every person in this building tonight, every person in any wrestling building, "Do you want to see Lex Luger or do you want to see Junkyard Dog?" Nothing against Junkyard Dog, he's a friend of mine, but as a business, people do not want to see people that are 45 years old getting in the ring. They want to see the young guys. They want to see the young talent in this business because we are what goes out and makes the matches exciting.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not sitting here saying the veterans in the sport have no place in it because granted they are the great ones. They are the ones who are holding the top spots right now. The kids in kindergarten today are going to be the presidents of the future. The kids of professional wrestling today are the ones who are doing the high-flying stuff, what the old-timers say is not wrestling. And I disagree with that because I am one of the young-timers that do it. We're the people who will be taking over professional wrestling in a few years and I've got this to say: I don't think we're doing a bad job right now.

Keller: What are some of the things you would do differently from Jim Herd besides keeping the tag teams together as you mentioned?

Douglas: First of all, you have to get the TV production up. Watch an NWA show and then watch a WWF show and you'll see a vast difference. And that's the first thing. They've had Jim Herd, he's had more than ample time to work those bugs out. He hasn't done so. Now whether that's his fault or not, I don't know. But whether the economy does well or not, the president of this country takes the heat for it. Jim Herd is in the "hot seat."

I would unquestionably add more entertainment into it because the people do want to see that. We get a clear mandate from what the people are paying to see at the WWF, they obviously want to see more entertainment involved in it. I would have to say you have to get

The WWF's where I would like to spend the rest of my career. I think I give the people their money's worth and I believe they will come to see me. I'll wrestle, and I'll wrestle hard for whoever is willing to pay me.

back into the (tag team situation). The tag teams that do well, like the Steiners, the people like them, the people will pay to see them, so keep them together. If you're selling cars and the cars you're selling sellout everyday you get them on the lot, then you're selling a good product. And you know you're doing something right. If you're doing that, you're sure as hell not going to go out and take those cars off the lot and put cars that are inferior to those cars or worse cars because you know they're not going to sell. It's a poor business. It's a poor business decision to break up The Dynamic Dudes, Tom Zenk & Brian Pillman, The Steiners. It is a poor business decision to use Eddie Gilbert the way they've used him. It's poor business to use Lex Luger the way they have used him. To let Sting get beat by The Four Horsemen as many times as they've let that happen (is a mistake). As a result, the NWA is suffering, they're drawing 200 and 300 people to the buildings when they should be drawing 20,000.

Keller: How do you compare the wrestling in the NWA to that of the WWF?

Douglas: The WWF gives entertainment as well as they give wrestling. Make no mistake about it, the people in the NWA talk about the WWF as if there is nobody who can wrestle up there. Some of the best talent is in the WWF right now. Curt Hennig, Ted DiBiase, Jake the Snake Robert, Hulk Hogan, Haku is a hell of a wrestler. If you go down name for name, the WWF is not as weak an organization as people would have you believe.

Keller: What is in the future of Shane Douglas?

Douglas: The WWF is definitely in the future. That's where I would like to spend the rest of my career if I could. I've spoken with the AWA and I wouldn't mind working for that organization. The only problem right now is we're having problems coming to an agreement on money. This is as much a business to me as it is to those who run the AWA. I don't expect a million dollars, but I don't expect five dollars to wrestle, either. I think I give the people their money's worth and I believe they will come to see me. Quite frankly I'll wrestle, and I'll wrestle hard for whoever is willing to pay me.



Shane Douglas

Wade Keller

DERRICK DUKES

Derrick "Starfire" Dukes is a wrestler in his third year professionally. He started in the Twin Cities-based PWA and moved from there to the AWA. For nearly the last year and a half, this super talent has been showcased as partners of Ricky Rice and Tommy Jammer, plus recently ended a controversial feud with Col. DeBeers. Just a few weeks ago Derrick Dukes was fired from the AWA minutes before his first chance at a World Championship, the one held by Larry Zbyszko. In this "Torch Talk" conducted in October 1989 with Wade Keller, Derrick Dukes discusses his feelings toward the AWA and his future plans.

Wade Keller: Have you officially left the AWA?

Derrick Dukes: Right now, yeah. I felt that the AWA was using me poorly. I felt that they didn't need me the way they were using me, so therefore I had a confrontation with the front office and was then fired.

Keller: What was the final straw in Rochester, Minnesota on October 1?

Dukes: The final straw? Looking up on the TV sheets and not having any match but one. And therefore I got in a confrontation with the front office and I was fired. I was told I couldn't return.



Derrick Dukes

Wade Keller

Keller: What are your thoughts on the AWA as an organization?

Dukes: It's kind of an up and down thing. I guess if you're not liked there, you won't be used well. If you're liked, you'll be used well.

Keller: How heavy of a schedule did the AWA have during your stay?

Dukes: It was up and down, up and down. Some months were really good, others were pretty slow. In the last month, I worked maybe two dates. You have to have a second income in order to wrestle there.

Keller: Do you see yourself ever returning to the AWA?

Dukes: It really depends. I would have to have a long talk with the front office and get a few things straightened. At this point, it looks like I can never return, or never want to return.

Keller: What are your impressions of Verne Gagne as a person and as a businessman?

Dukes: Personally, myself, I like Verne. He was all right. But as far as business, it was a different aspect. I feel he should do better business than what he has been doing. I guess that's the reasoning behind a lot of people leaving. If he were a better businessman to a certain extent, he could keep a lot of people around, but that isn't the case.

Keller: If you were to give advice to the AWA, what would that be?

Dukes: They would have to start running more shows, paying the guys, keeping the guys busy. (If the wrestlers are) making money, how can they complain?

Keller: Do you think they would simply lose more money if they ran more shows as displayed this summer with the "suburban tour"?

Dukes: The thing in the summer was just a fling around here. They should run shows around Wisconsin, too, some places where we did well. But right now they're still at a rebuilding stage. They still have to keep people in there. If they could keep the same crew and push the crew that lives here instead of those who are flying all over, they'd be all right.

Keller: Were you ever informed about your scheduled main event match which took place against Larry Zbyszko at last August's UAWF convention?

Dukes: I never knew anything about it. I first heard about it from someone after it was all over.

Keller: Do you think they ever planned to have the card?

Dukes: To be truthful, the situation was kind of weird. It has to do with money. I think the AWA would have run a show had there been enough money.

I've talked to a lot of blacks in wrestling and a lot of them want to be the first black—this, the first black—that. That's not my point. Mine is to make a fair share of the money. That's just my goal in wrestling. Be the best I can be and make money.

Keller: Recently Joey Browner of the Minnesota Vikings caused quite a stir in the NFL when he stated on an ESPN interview that he faced racism from the front office. Did you face anything like that in the AWA?

Dukes: You know, I read some of the things Browner had to say. I feel in professional wrestling there's prejudice in every way, not just color. I don't know if Verne or Greg were prejudiced. I got along with both of them to an extent. As far as racism or being called (derogatory names), that never occurred with me. I have to say I enjoyed myself at some point in the AWA. It did get kind of out of hand with the thing with DeBeers. There's racism in every sport and pro wrestling probably has it, too. As far as people being prejudiced with me, right out front, no. I think it was just me personally, instead of my color. I could be wrong.

Keller: What was your reaction when the paint stipulations with DeBeers were introduced to you?

Dukes: After the thing to start the angle, my first reaction was maybe it was a plus to my career, but after hearing about the paint, it was definitely racism. Ricky Rice and I were doing imitations of the Sheiks and that was racism. Every league has its racism, so what are you going to do?

Keller: Would you do another similar angle if you thought it could make money?

Dukes: Well, I'd really like to stay away from it because down the end of the road it just causes grief. Probably a percentage of fans looked at that whole aspect and said, "Boy it's out of hand." I don't think we could go down south with that angle. I think someone would get killed.

Keller: What are your career plans now?

Dukes: Right now a lot of people are talkin', are you going here, are you going there? Right now what Derrick Dukes is doing is letting his knee heal. I've got some independent shots in New Jersey, Florida, and Denver in November and December. From there, I might head to Calgary or possibly the NWA. It looks like it's

—Please see DUKES, pg. 51

BILL EADIE

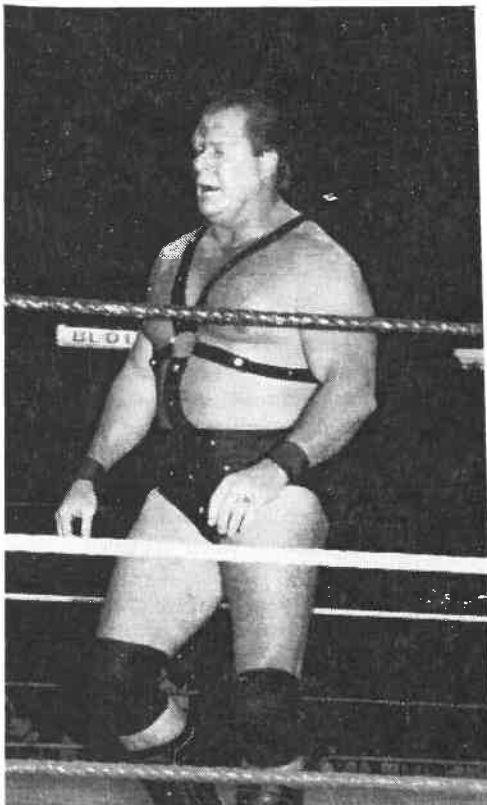
Bill Eadie has had an illustrious career, working main event matches as Masked Superstar, Super Destroyer, and Demolition Axe in territories and promotions all over the United States and Japan for over 15 years. Now retired from active wrestling and also recently departed as lead booker with the Global Wrestling Federation, Bill Eadie has a lot of thoughts on his career, recent events with Global, and the state of the wrestling business as a whole. The following "Torch Talk" interview was conducted via telephone from Eadie's home in Roswell, Ga. on Nov. 30, 1991.

Wade Keller: How did you originally get involved in pro wrestling?

Bill Eadie: In West Virginia I went to a couple of matches at the Civic Arena. I met some people and one of the promoters down there, Geto Mongol, ended up training me.

Keller: When you were growing up, did you have desires to become a pro wrestler or was it a new-found interest?

Eadie: I never watched it, to be honest with ya'. My grandmother watched a lot of it, but I never got involved in it until falling into it with my friend's father being an athletic commissioner and then meeting Geto Mongol.



Bill Eadie as Demolition Axe

Wade Keller

Keller: What was it that convinced you to get into pro wrestling? Were you unsure of what to do with yourself or did you have other options?

Eadie: I was teaching at the time. I graduated from the university and I was teaching for five years. I taught physical education, special studies, and psychology.

Keller: That's quite a switch from teaching kids to fighting men in the ring.

Eadie: Yeah. At that time, though, it was more lucrative to get into wrestling, I thought. And when I found out the kind of money potential I would have, I decided I better give it a chance.

Keller: Are you happy that you went into wrestling?

Eadie: Yeah. I've accomplished a lot and have seen a lot of things. If I hadn't done it, I would have been a what-if guy all of my life. What if I had tried it, what if I had done this.

Keller: In all of your years wrestling under masks and behind make-up, did you always have the desire to work behind the scenes in pro wrestling some day?

Eadie: I think that was the natural progression for me.

Keller: Did you find yourself asking a lot of questions or learning more through osmosis?

Eadie: I used to ask. It's both. If you're interested, you've got to ask some questions and know the whys and wherefores. But you have to study it, too.

Keller: Who were some of the promoters you learned the most from, not that they were necessarily good or necessarily bad, but you learned from them?

Eadie: I thought that especially bookers were good to learn from. George Scott had a good mind. Bill Watts, of course. You learn a little bit about the business from each one, whether it is bad or good. I think that Frank Tunney on the way he dealt with the guys, being such an upright guy. Then there's some guys that you learn negative things from, but I won't drop any names.

Keller: Under what circumstances did you leave the WWF after being a member of Demolition for so long?

Eadie: I had gotten sick. I had an allergic reaction to shrimp. At that time they had brought in Brian (Adams as Crush). Plus, we had been there such a long time, too, that I think it's only natural that you should have to change your talent frequently, five years being frequently. We were there for five years. But unfortunately, they've had a lot of guys, even right now, that have been there too long. Unfortunately you've had a lot of guys in a lot of territories too long where the people get used to them. A couple of years ago the Bill Cosby Show was so hot that everybody watched it, and now it's dropped

down and I think that you have to change your faces and change your talent. People get accustomed to it and want to see new things. Throughout my career I made moves after a couple of years, really, because you get a sense for it.

Keller: Not only did you travel all over the United States, but you wrestled in Japan a lot. Did you enjoy touring Japan?

Eadie: Oh yeah, I think that's probably my most favorite time because my dealing with the Japanese has always been very above-board and honest.

Keller: Do you think, in general, that is the right way to deal with wrestlers or is that not conducive to the nature of the business, which seems to be the attitude of a lot of today's promoters?

Eadie: No. I think that we're all human beings and if you deal with people correctly, you give them one or two chances. After that you have to make a decision. I think people want to be given the courtesy of at least trying to be honest in this business because this business has the reputation for being very, very dishonest. All the promoters and bookers and all these guys will B.S. ya'. The guys have been accustomed to taking one percent or two percent of what they earn and that's about it.

Keller: When you were with the WWF and your string with them as a wrestler was coming to an end and you ran into health problems, did you hope for or even expect an office position with the WWF?

Eadie: Well, I was given that option. For one reason or another that didn't develop. There are some disturbing feelings there. That's not the end of the world. The world goes on. Wrestling's not the center of the world, but sometimes you get tunnel vision.

Keller: So you had the opportunity to work for the WWF in an office position but chose not to?

Eadie: I decided not to. What they were offering me was not what I thought I was worth.

Keller: How did you then get hooked up with Global and Joe Pedicino?

Eadie: He had approached me during the time I was finishing up with the WWF. At that time there appeared to be much larger funding that was going to be influxed into it, millions and millions of dollars.

Keller: Were you supposed to be brought in as lead booker?

Eadie: Supposedly. They didn't like to use the term booker. They said committee of three or four guys were supposed to contribute.

Keller: A lot of people have varying views of the situation with Olu Oiyami. In retrospect, what went wrong with the original Global

funding and plans?

Eadie: To be honest with ya', I think Olyami's intentions were above board. I think Joe had seen a pie in the sky type of thing. But I don't think Olyami could father the funds. I think that he's still interested in it. I haven't had any contact with him. I don't know if Joe or anyone else has. In my dealings with him, I sensed that he was very open about it. If there would have been the money there, it would have gone through.

Keller: In the early going when things started rolling for Global in May, June, July, did you see Global as a long-term commitment or as an experiment that may or may not work?

Eadie: You always look at it like it is going to be long range. I looked at it as an opportunity that could take off. You always get into something this way as a potential investment. If it's gonna get that big, hopefully it will pay off. If it doesn't, it doesn't.

Keller: What were your personal goals if everything had gone the way you hoped? Did you think Global had a chance to equal WCW in stature as a legitimate top three promotion in exposure and talent?

Eadie: I think we could have surprised WCW to be honest. The ratings were coming up. Like I said before, dealing with talent, I've always had a good relationship with guys and they know I'm not going to B.S. them. I may not say some of the things they want to hear, but I think that we would have been able to develop a good relationship with the guys and the guys were hungry for something like that. We didn't go in with the object of being number one.

Keller: What were some of the most frustrating things in your days behind the scenes trying to promote Global?

Eadie: I think the lack of funds. Constantly working and trying to cut corners. That's not the intention we had. We just got into it without proper capital. I think if you look at all kinds of business ventures, I think that's probably 65 or 75 percent of it.

Keller: Could you have overcome the limits of the funding?

Eadie: Oh, I think so. Some of the people didn't understand the workings of the business.

Keller: Would part of the poor decision making rest on the owners, Danny Overstreet and Carol Lindsay?

Eadie: It got to the point where all I was doing was cleaning up, mopping up after people. It was very discouraging, some of the things that were going on. If you don't know the business involved, you can't make those decisions, you have to rely on somebody else's expertise.

Keller: Why are you no longer with Global?

Eadie: Funding. I wasn't getting paid. I'm not going to continue working for no income and,

two, I'm not going to continue infringing on some of my friendships with the promise of the intention that there is going to be money down the road when I don't see it.

Keller: Do you believe Joe Pedicino's statement that in January, Max Andrews will come through with very sufficient funding to make things go stronger than ever?

Eadie: I think the chances of that are very slim. I've told Joe that myself. I've told Max. I told Danny and Carol. It's a revolving door. Funding is based on your product. If your product is inferior and your product can't draw money, who's going to pick up your advertising costs. You can't always feature the same ten or fifteen guys. That's why ESPN and all these other purchasers were interested in Global because they were going to bring in new faces. Well, they don't have that and haven't had that for the last six weeks. By the time January comes it will be almost three months of the same matches. I don't care, even if you put on the Cosby Show and run the same episode for six weeks, people are going to say they want to see something else.

Keller: Who do you think were some of the stronger wrestlers who could have helped Global over the long haul?

Eadie: I think Big Bully (Nick) Busick was one. Chris Walker. Steve Simpson, of course, put in a lot of good effort. Handsome Stranger (Marcus Bagwell). Al Perez. Soul Taker (aka Papa Shango, Kama) was coming along. Of course, Bad News (Allen Coage). We had some good talent. One Man Gang was going to be there. We had an influx of known veterans and mixed them with young, inexperienced talent. Of course, The Patriot was going to help. And Lightning Kid (a/k/a 1-2-3 Kid).

Keller: What are your thoughts on Lightning Kid, given that he breaks the mold of today's prototype wrestler in that he's not huge muscularly and apparently is willing to risk his body in each match?

Eadie: I liked him. He does stuff that nobody else can do. He does a lot of the Japanese style. There was a lot of criticism when we first brought him in there, a lot of the old timers and a lot of the veterans said, "What are you doing?" but I saw something in the kid that he was willing to give you 190 percent, not just 100 percent. He doesn't ask a lot just to get an opportunity. He caught on. It only took him a couple of opportunities. What does it say about pro wrestling when one of the young wrestlers with the most talent, desire, and potential, doesn't get respect because he doesn't take illegal drugs to look bigger?

I think unfortunately that in the two major places right now, you have to accept the fact that variety is the spice of life. They keep saying we have to do this, we have to do that. But if you get all the guys that look the same, wear the same

When we first brought him in there, a lot of the old timers and a lot of the veterans said, "What are you doing?" but I saw something in the kid that he was willing to give you 190 percent, not just 100 percent. He doesn't ask a lot just to get an opportunity. He caught on.

tights, bulk up on steroids, and all do the same moves, people aren't going to pay attention to it. You have to have that kind of variety. With Lightning Kid, although physically he doesn't look intimidating to somebody else, I would venture to say that 99 out of 100 people, after watching one of his matches, know he can do something that they can't. They have to admire the kid for that. I think that there's a position for someone like that. I think the one thing we were successful with in Global was introducing or making that light-heavyweight belt mean something. After we had our tournament, WCW had one but they just put in someone who had already been there, no new faces. I think that we maybe opened somebody's eyes. Like I said, we weren't out to take over the world. There's enough people and enough markets out there for five groups.

Keller: Do you think there is enough fan money to support three groups on a wide scale just specifically looking at TV?

Eadie: I think that's one thing that's hurting wrestling—TV. Unfortunately, everything you see on TV is not of good quality. When I broke in a long time ago, Geto told me that one of the major factors in a downfall of anything is that the TV started to hurt yourself, meaning your big star comes to town, everybody wants to see him, but he has a belly ache or a toe nail that's hurting him, so he only wants to go two or three minutes, and the people have paid the money. It's not the local guys that work their hearts out and try to make it big, it's the big TV stars who come. It's like if Magic Jonshon came to the Omni all the time and just moped around, ran half-assed up and down the court, the people say, "Hell, that team's no good." The guys get spoiled sometimes. I'm not saying it's not due to injuries and being tired of travelling, because it is. You can't push the body 300 or 315 times a year and expect not to be hurt, tired, and exhausted. I think the wrestlers need to get paid better, too.

Keller: Looking at Lex Luger and Sting, who are paid well into six figures per year, you hear complaints from fans around the country who go to matches regularly that those two and many others of their type are lazy or don't put the effort into their matches as main eventers used to years ago. Is it unfair to compare Sting and Luger and the others like them to extraordinary athletes like Ric Flair and hold them to his standards or are they being lazy and acting spoiled?

Eadie: I don't know what it comes from. But I do know that for every guy who's in the position Luger's in, five, six, seven hundred thousand dollars a year, there's probably 10 or 12 who are at best just making a living. Although I always made a good living, I thought it was unfair because of the position you're on the card that there should be so much variance. There's no reason for one guy to go out and work 300 days a year and earn 65 or 70 thousand and another guy sitting across from him makes half a million. The effort expounded is not that much different. It's based, a lot of times, on politics. It's not based on how good you are. In all my years wrestling I've seen extraordinary guys never get a break and conversely I've seen guys who couldn't even tie their boots up and don't know a headlock from a wristlock or a wristwatch, but just because they know where to put their nose and do this and do that and be rewarded for it. It's not fair, but life's not fair.

Keller: Do you think it was important to keep some of Global's top wrestlers under contract?

Eadie: Of course it would be, but the funding just wasn't there. Most of these guys will go for an opportunity to go to the WWF and Turner's group. Some of them may be rewarded, some of them may not. In some cases, it wasn't that WCW or the WWF were interested in the talent, but they just didn't want Global to have them.

Keller: Do you think you'll ever get back into promoting, be it WCW, WWF, GWF, or another promotion?

Eadie: At this point, I don't have any interest in it, to be honest with you. I've got another business that we're trying to develop and it looks like it's going to be very good and it's so time-consuming. To be honest, I've got a bad taste in my mouth about wrestling.

Keller: Because of people you had to deal with or just the state of the business?

Eadie: Both. Mostly the people you have to deal with. There's just too much you have to wade through. Sometimes I have to take a shovel with me to get through the stuff.

Keller: Why are respected veteran wrestlers and promoters like you and Bill Watts not involved in the wrestling business? Are the wrong people running the major promotions?

Eadie: I think that could be the case, but I think

What does it say about pro wrestling when one of the young wrestlers with the most talent, desire, and potential, doesn't get respect because he doesn't take illegal drugs to look bigger?

there are a lot of situations where it's political. There are a lot of individuals in decision-making positions who aren't qualified to be there. Most of the time it's just because of an interest group of cronyism or finances. It's slowly happening right now. I can see the decline in this business. I don't think that wrestling will ever fade away.

Keller: Where do you see the wrestling industry five or ten years from now?

Eadie: Well, I think that it's already reaching its peak. As a matter of fact, I thought that it reached its peak three or four years ago. I think it's going to go down a steady decline until it goes back to smaller territories the way it was ten or fifteen years ago. Maybe that's a necessary progression, a cycle that as long as I've seen it, it's gone up and down. But it hasn't had the megateritories that it had the last four or five years. A particular territory like Charlotte would go up, up, up, and then decline, but some other territory would rise. The talent would be more free to move from place to place. I think that the guys now, if you talk to most guys, now, they feel trapped. Either you go to New York or you go to Atlanta. It's almost like a monopoly and the people who control those places say, "Hey, you gotta' do this, you gotta' do that." Then the guys lose enthusiasm. There's a little clique group here and a little clique group there and you're not going to crack it. Change in the talent underneath is not going to change the problem because you have to make the main event big stars interesting.

Keller: In dealing with Joe Pedicino, for example, what are some of his stronger or weaker points as one of the influential promoters in pro wrestling?

Eadie: I don't think Joe really understands the talent. I don't think he respects it. I think most of the guys realize that.

Keller: How are not understanding and not respecting different?

Eadie: He's got some good ideas with television. I think that's his strong point. He's got some strong points. But you have to realize just because an idea doesn't work with every piece of talent, you have to then find the right piece of talent. You don't get a great gimmick and put it on the wrong guy and expect it to work. Some guys don't need gimmicks, some guys do. First

of all, it has to be a relationship with the talent. I don't think the talent really understands Joe. I don't want to be too negative.

I think one of the most important factors was me being one of the boys. You have to understand that. It's not just a business where you put Joe Blow against Joe Schmo and expect to have this fantastic match. Joe Blow and Joe Schmo might not be able to do it. You've got to develop a relationship with the guys. I coached football for five years and then watching that, developing my relationship with guys through the years, they knew I wasn't going to B.S. them. Just because you have an angle, you can't just put two guys in there and say, "We're gonna' do that angle." It has to fit. Sometimes you have to wait. You also have to be honest with people. You can't promise everybody the whole pie in the sky and then not even communicate with people.

Keller: If you could wave a magic wand and change something about pro wrestling today, what would that be?

Eadie: I tell ya', one of the things that I'd do is make sure the guys have the fundamental skills. Just because you go to the gym and pump steroids and look like Arnold Schwarzenegger doesn't mean you're going to be a good wrestler. You have to have the ability and more importantly you've got to have the moves. You can have the best body in the world, but if you can't project yourself to the people and convince the people of what you're trying to do, it just won't work. People go down there and they get these pumped up bodybuilders. It's like ten years ago they went through the Haystacks Calhoun bodytypes. They were supposed to be the strong types. Now they introduce the bodybuilders. That doesn't mean they know how to entertain and wrestle. Some of them can, but with the majority that's not the way it is. Now out of seven matches on a card, you have two or three that are supposed to carry the whole load. They're the guys who can put on the tights, that can work, that can carry this, they get a good worker to carry a worker that can't work and then they sh-- on the good worker and make the steroid freak look good.

It's negative reinforcement. It's not the guy who's getting put over's fault. He goes to the gym and works out and never learns how to do anything but lift weights, but every night he gets put over. So he says to himself, "I must be good because they're using me well. I must be great because they pay me great. Look at a guy like a Terry Taylor and they pay him peanuts and they get another guy who he has to put over for a year and a half and makes five times what he's making. It's just insane.

Keller: Take a look at a guy like Van Hammer, who has been put in a position where the hardcores hate him because he is so green, but is shoved down the casual fans' throats as a superstar.

Eadie: Well, the fans aren't as dumb as the promoters think. There are fans who have sat in that Omni for 20 years. They know more finishes and they've seen the best and worst workers. They know when a guy steps into the ring whether he is qualified to be there or not qualified to be there. And unfortunately the young guy doesn't realize that. He thinks he's doing well. He can't work, whoever it is, so after the third appearance the people say, "He's the sh—s." He's labelled that for the rest of his career.

Keller: How is that problem solved?

Eadie: Simple. Don't put the guy in that situation in the first place. You solve it by possibly having a farm system where they're secluded and they work six days a week. If you want to invest in a guy and think this guy's gonna make it, he's got potential, then you can invest some time and develop him like a farm system. One territory where he works four or five nights a week and works there six months or maybe a year if he has to. You don't introduce a guy like poor Johnny B. Badd. He's developing. Johnny B. Badd had maybe three or four matches. He walks in the ring, makes a good impression, people go wow, and you ring the bell, and after three or four matches, people go, "This guy is horrible. Then he struggles and struggles and he may develop—he seems to be a real nice guy. I've talked to him—and it takes him four or five years, but he's burned out nationwide because he's already been seen by the nation. Then what do you do? There's no place to hide anybody anymore like the old territories. Before you were featured in New York, Charlotte, or Atlanta, they'd place you in Alabama, or Tennessee, or Portland, get out the wrinkles, polish off the tough edges, and then boom, you come into the big time.

Keller: And then places like Portland there were veteran wrestlers who would help the younger wrestlers develop, veterans who no longer wanted to work full time or travel a lot. Is it possible to revive that system?

Eadie: I don't know. I don't think that Vince or Turner, it doesn't matter how much money they have, they can't afford to do it. They have to go into a building like Richfield Coliseum, the Spectrum, and they need at least three-quarters to break even. And they're so used to hype, hype, hype. Every match is not the greatest in the world. You can overhype these things and the public has caught on to it.

Keller: What do you think the future of pay-per-view is, especially considering that pro wrestling is going to face new competition in that market from the Olympics and hockey and other sports?

Eadie: I think it will eventually burn out. I think they will have to do one of two things; they will have to either reduce the price to make sure

that more people purchase the events or raise the price to take a smaller share of the market to make the same profit. It's not going to stay the same. It was a novelty and it made especially Vince's show "big time." I think there are going to be other changes and not just in pay-per-view.

I think one of the problems in every market right now is that there is just too much wrestling on television. There just is. It's just saturated. Unless there's something extraordinary, like a big event. Maybe they'll just go to big events. Maybe there'll be only four or five big events a year and they'll eventually have to cut out the local shows because, hell, people can watch eight or nine hours—not counting cable—of wrestling on TV a week.

Keller: Do you think it was a good or bad decision for Global to tackle house shows in their first few months? Should Global stay strictly TV?

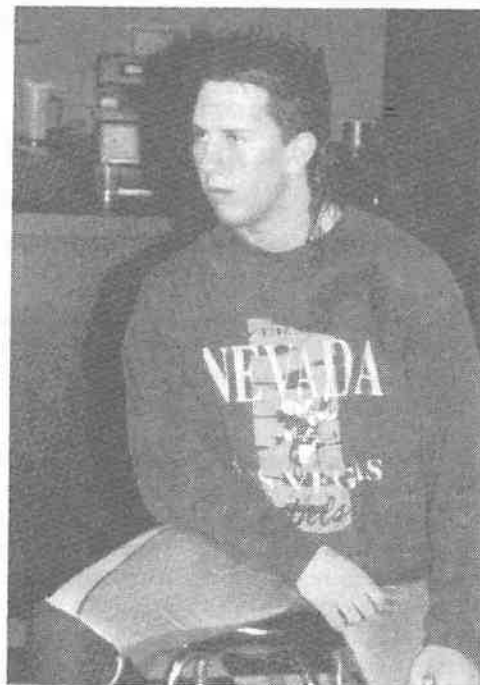
Eadie: The intentions were to just work weekends. Now I don't know if that will ever get off the ground. It would have if they would have kept the new talent coming in. But I don't think it's going to draw with the amount of talent they have now. Now it's strictly a Texas show, the same as it was eight months ago. They've got one face a month. I think it would've been really good if we had gone into Texas and Georgia and had these new faces. But they're not going to be able to draw and they're fooling themselves when they think they are.

Keller: Do you believe it is the promoters' responsibility to both test for steroids and not reward wrestlers based on their mass through bigger pushes or are steroids just a part of wrestling that needs to be accepted?

Eadie: Unfortunately I think it's just a matter of fact. Whether they tell you that directly or indirectly, right now those are the guys that are getting pushed. That doesn't mean they're good workers. And some of the guys that are getting pushed on steroids are bad workers. I think that's just a phase they're going through, that's the look that they want, and I think they're fooling themselves because that doesn't correlate with work ability.

Keller: What is the promoter's responsibility since they are running a business where they are rewarding their employees who choose to use illegal steroids and abuse their bodies as they sit back in their plush chairs and reap the rewards?

Eadie: Unfortunately I think they don't give a damn. I think the greed has stepped in to the point where some of these guys think they're above the law. Because that's how they treat some of the talent. "You don't wanna' do it? Okay, we'll get another guy in to do it," they say. They don't really give a damn. It's gotten to the point where they don't take the talent into consideration. See, wrestling never has been that way. In all of my



1-2-3 (Lightning) Kid

Wade Keller

life and talking to the old-timers, there were very few promoters that had the respect of the talent. It was almost like an old slave-master relationship. Some of the guys got a better feeling toward the promoters because they got more money. The majority of the guys in wrestling work because they like the business, not because they like the promoters. I can't speak for Turner's group because I've never worked for Turner. But from the information that I hear from the other guys, they don't care. And if you don't wanna' do it, they'll find someone else to do it. And I don't think that it's going to change until the wrestlers get a union. I think that's the way of the future.

Keller: I hate to stereotype, and maybe I'm totally wrong to bring it up, but the feeling I get is that the loyalties between pro wrestlers is not the strongest bond in wrestling.

Eadie: That's it exactly.

Keller: So how can these guys work together when they're all fighting over the top spot on the cards?

Eadie: But it's going to have to happen. It is a dog eat dog business. Years ago when we were working in the IWA when Eddie Einhorn was trying to start out, even the promoter, Eddie Einhorn, advocated a union. He was one of the guys of the future. He said, "No, we need this to protect you guys." Well, there's a case where four or five of the main event guys were paranoid. They did trust us. They didn't trust them. That's the way it's going to be. There's a lot of clear-thinking, futuristic guys in wrestling. There's a lot of need there and there's a lot of scuttlebutt talk in the dressing rooms and there has been for a lot of years about starting a union. Well, every time that turns up, some stooge in the

It was hard convincing the guys to lose a match. They're worried that if they lose a match, they'll be done. They didn't trust that everyone would have their share.

dressings room tells one of the guys up in the office and that guy just happens to disappear, he's not around (the promotion) anymore.

Keller: Was that the case with Jim Brunzell?

Eadie: It sure was. Brunzell and B. Brian Blair. But to the point, I mean if they wanted to pursue it, they could get some union guy in some legal situation there. If my understanding's correct, even if you have 10 or 15 guys out of a hundred, you can still form a union and they can't disband that. It might take legal action and you might lose your job, but down the road there's going to be retroactive pay. But there again, you try to get something started that you think is going to help the guys and they're all worried about themselves.

Keller: The fact that such a large majority of wrestlers take steroids puts everyone on even par. If nobody took steroids, but still worked out, everyone would still be even to a certain degree. There would be some parody to the order of physiques we see now. But even under a union situation, there's always going to be accusations when somebody—possibly due to genetics—looks too good that they're possibly on steroids.

Eadie: This testing situation is a farce, too. One thing that Bruno (Sammartino) brought up that is very apropos is that Vince may use that as a tool to weed out the guys, the undesirables they don't want. That doesn't mean they're necessarily undesirable, but maybe they don't adhere to their policy. Same thing with the other testing, cocaine and the other stuff. It's miraculous that three or four guys would fail three or four tests and maybe still be there while others might fail once and be gone. You get spanked on the hand, you're a bad guy and you're bad for the business, or all of a sudden a couple of guys happen to miss the test. Who knows the results? The results go back to the office and they say, "You're out!" or "You're suspended!" while another guy is told, "You're not suspended, because you're one of our main guys, a crony."

Keller: And they say it is confidential for personal and privacy reasons.

Eadie: Oh, please. That's a bunch of bull. The only way to do the testing is for some independent group to randomly test and make public the results. It's not the guys' fault, they sit in the locker room, look at the other guys, and

say, "Hell, this guy can't even work and he's making \$300,000 and I can work, so maybe I need to get on the steroids." It's running rampant. And the office condones it. They don't have to say take 'em. But they can insinuate that it might be better for you to take them. They can insinuate that it might be better for you to look better or do this or do that.

Look at Ultimate Warrior. He had the hardest gimmick in the last ten years. He had to look that part all of the time. Bodybuilders can go on cycles, train for a contest, and then relax. Then they can go on again. But he had to stay on them all of the time to look like the Ultimate Warrior ultimately all the time. See, I feel sorry for the guy. It has to affect ya'. Everyone knows the problems with being aggressive and not sleeping and the pressure of having to work out three or four hours a day whether he liked it or not. He was a good guy and I always got along well with Jim. There was a guy who was pushed, but he really wasn't ready for that position. He would have been if he was moved along gradually. Then he got a lot of criticism from guys in the dressing room, a lot of jealousy on the part of guys in the locker room. It's not his fault. He just got caught up in it.

Keller: What do you think of the way Hulk Hogan has handled the steroid situation, such as denying use and abuse of it on Arsenio Hall?

Eadie: I think it's wrong. I think it's wrong. And I like Hogan, Hogan's a friend of mine. But hell, everybody was on them.

Keller: Hogan has done much good with all of the charity stuff that he does without the cameras present, but do you think when historians write the book on Hulk Hogan that lying about steroid use will be a real blemish on his record?

Eadie: All you have to do with all the guys, myself included, is you take photos even in their prime and you look at photos or tapes of when they were on at the peak and then normal. Other guys, like in my case, I'd go up maybe 15 pounds or so. A lot of guys, like Davey Boy Smith, he's a 175 or 180 pound guy, but now he's bulked up to 250. If he were to get off steroids for a six month period, he'd be back down to around 200 pounds. Unfortunately, with Warlord, it's the same thing. And Warlord, he's just trying to make a buck. But he's a 220 pound guy who's bulked up to 320 pounds.

Keller: With below average in-ring talent, Hogan's size is even more important to him making money. At what point in your career did you feel the most pressure to get on steroids?

Eadie: When I went to New York (WWF). The last time I took any steroids at all would be about two years ago. I was taking an average of maybe one shot of deca every seven to ten days. I never

got on them too heavy because I was always afraid of them. I didn't know. I'm gonna listen to the guys in the dressing room whose skin is popping up? They're not doctors. I went to a doctor friend of mine and he said, "It will stay in your system for about 15 days, so if you want to take one shot every 7 to 10 days..." That's what I used to do. I'd go on them before the big events, before Wrestlemania, before Survivors, before SummerSlam. Before that, I didn't need them. My weight would never fluctuate too much. When I'd get on the steroids I'd get up to maybe 278. I haven't been on steroids for about two years and I'm still about 261. But it redistributes. When you're on steroids, you feel more aggressive. You feel this euphoric feeling that you can do anything you want to, but at the same time you're aggressive as hell and you can be as obnoxious as hell, too. The reason I was always cautious with them was because I have normally high blood pressure, too, anyways.

Keller: Would you agree with the estimates that Superstar Graham and Bruno Sammartino said that 90 percent of the wrestlers are on steroids? You've been in the locker rooms more recently than either of them.

Eadie: I agree with them. It may be even higher. I would guarantee that 9 out of 10 guys are on them.

Keller: In the WWF?

Eadie: In all of them. Nationwide, some of the smaller groups might bring it down to 75 percent only in the respect they don't have the money to buy them. But those guys were spending—I won't name drop—but there were guys spending about \$3000 a month on steroids. Guys who were taking—instead of taking one shot a week or every ten days—were taking one or two shots a day.

Keller: That's scary.

Eadie: Believe me, it is scary.

Keller: I don't even want to think of the condition these guys will be in in 10 or 15 years.

Eadie: Billy Graham is a classic example. It's good that he's brought this out.

Keller: A lot of wrestlers go into denial and say Graham's just a freak case and it's genetics. But when a few others start dropping, I think it's going to change wrestling.

Eadie: I think it's a very, very bad situation that is going to come across in the next 8 or 9 years, it's going to surface. I don't know how they will rectify it. Like I said, it's negative reinforcement. Most of the guys are getting reinforced by money, they say, "Well, gee, I'm doing this, I'm getting paid, I look great, I gotta continue doing this."

Keller: Is it tough not to gain a sense of

invincibility, whether you are 23 or 38, when steroids make you feel so healthy?

Eadie: Of course. There again, the guys don't know what's happening to them. I don't think anybody ever does. If you hear of an accident, you always say, "It's not going to happen to me."

Keller: I think the whole Magic Johnson situation, not that it was a mystery going in, but what it's really brought to the forefront is the risk of AIDS in wrestling. I would think that wrestlers would be one of the highest risk groups for three main reasons: One, many go to bars after the cards and when they return to their hotel rooms, they're not alone. Two, there's a lot of bleeding that goes on, although not as much as in the past. Three, if there is a lot of steroid use in locker room, I don't know how much needle sharing goes on. You combine those three things and you've got a problem maybe bigger than steroids. Would you be for eliminating blading from wrestling under any circumstances?

Eadie: I don't think there's a real need for blood. All the matches that we had in Global and all of them I had over an eight year period in New York never had any blood. I've always been under the contention that using blood is a cheap way of getting heat, using a gimmick (a foreign object) is a cheap way of getting attention. Your work should be the way to express your ability. Anybody can get a crowd uproared if you bleed and anybody can get a crowd in an uproar if you pull a gimmick out of your tights. It's how do you control the people with your work ability. I think that blood and gimmicks are the lazy way of doing it, but some people disagree and think that's the only way to do it.

Keller: Let's take a look at the way Japanese promoters have promoted wrestling for years, as diverse as they are, from the realism of the UWF to the bloody brawling of FMW to the more traditional All Japan and New Japan styles. Do you think American promoters would be smart to look to Japan and emulate some of their promoting styles or does culture eliminate any translations of success?

Eadie: I think that the one thing that's been successful for the Japanese that probably couldn't work for us is they promote on the "Japanese vs. the world" idea. Even though they bring people from all over the world, they promote as the "Japanese all-stars vs. the world." I don't think we could do that here in the States because we're such a melting pot. They've got a more nationalism situation where they feel they're fighting for their national pride. The Japanese people are very, very observant and they recognize talent. Just because you're a heel or a supposed bad guy from another country, that doesn't mean they don't like you.

Keller: Like Bruiser Brody?

Eadie: Or even my situation or Stan Hansen, they still like you and appreciate ability. They also know just like the intelligent fans here in the

States, when a guy can work and when he can't. I think the promoters and bookers forget that. There's a lot of hardcore fans out there that know this business. They just know it. And you can't insult that. And you can see that in some of the houses. You can't say this guy is the greatest thing since the wheel when he's not.

Keller: Or like Jim Ross, who otherwise is a generally top-notch announcer, who said if Van Hammer didn't win rookie of the year, they shouldn't have the award.

Eadie: What they need to do is to curtail some of these announcers. We used to get on our announcers, too. Every match is not a great match, not a main event anywhere in the world. Sometimes saying nothing is the appropriate thing. Let the people make the decision. Don't try to cover up and say what a great thing was when it stunk.

Keller: Who are some of the announcers over the years that you thought really lent credibility to the business and didn't overdo the hype, and not necessarily over their entire careers, but at a certain point in their careers?

Eadie: It's really hard to tell. I think Gordon Solie was good. I thought Bill Cardell way back when I was just starting in Pittsburgh, I thought he was good. Of course, Jesse Ventura added another side to it. There were some guys that were better interviewers than were commentators.

Keller: What about Gorilla Monsoon's or Vince McMahon's style?

Eadie: I thought Lord Alfred Hayes brought a good perspective to it. Sometimes these guys get involved in too much hype or too much putting themselves over. Focus on what's going on in the ring and let the color commentator bring up some behind the scenes locker room talk or training tips like Jesse was good at. It got to the point there for a while where it seemed like Wrestlemania XVII was going to be Jesse vs. Vince. I don't think people want to see that. A lot of the commentating is not directed toward action in the ring, but it's a constant hype for what's coming up. I found that if you tuned them out in your minds and watched the matches, you'd get a better perspective on what's going on.

One thing there's going to have to be more of, which I think we tried to do with Global, is you've got to put on quality matches. You can't put on squash matches. I was involved in it, and when you're in the forest, you can't see the trees. But when the light comes on and the music turns on, you know—boom—that guy's gonna win. Unless they have a ratings week where you have music for both guys, and then you're gonna have a draw. There're football teams that win and lose. There're baseball teams that win and lose.

Keller: Michael Jordan loses 25 percent of his games every year.

Eadie: Right, but the guys don't want to do that. They don't want to put on quality matches and go on TV and lose. That's one of the most positive feedbacks we got from Global viewers was that 85 percent of the time you didn't know who was going to win the matches.

Keller: That ties really well back to Japan wrestling. One of the strongest parts of Japanese wrestling is the suspense of who is going to win and the realization that even the top stars sometimes lose.

Eadie: The promoters need to look at that. That's what we tried to do. It was hard convincing the guys to lose a match. They're worried that if they lose a match, they'll be done. They didn't trust that everyone would have their share.

Keller: So you had to earn their trust back?

Eadie: The guys have been shafted so much now that they're looking over their shoulders all the time. At the same time, say you and I have an agreement where I'm gonna help you and you're gonna help me. But then I help you and you say, "To hell with Bill," what kind of trust are you going to have in the future. But that's the way it works all the time. Then I say, "Well, I helped you." And you say, "Well, you should."

Keller: If you had \$50 million and could only use it to start a wrestling promotion and the only return on that investment would be profit made from the wrestling company, what would be some of the first moves you would make in this country in the condition wrestling's in today?

Eadie: First of all, if I had \$50 million I wouldn't get into wrestling. I really wouldn't. To be very honest with you, I don't know. I would try to surround myself with guys who knew different aspects of the business. I would go nationwide, but set up a network where if one guy got stale, he could move to a different part of the country and be fresh. I'm really confused right now, though. Wrestling is on a real downswing right now. It's not the business, it's the people in the business and I don't think you'll get these people out of the business. I would advocate that the guys start a union so that some of the guys could have some influence themselves; it would take some of the burden off of the promoters.

Keller: I think promoters tend to look at a wrestlers' union as their enemy, but might it alleviate some of their work?

Eadie: They have to realize that there are a lot of inside workings that would be taken away from them, such as steroid testing and AIDS testing.

Keller: And the wrestlers would contribute to such tests through union dues.

Eadie: One of the things now is guys can't afford medical benefits. That would be tremendously beneficial for all wrestlers.

KIP FREY

During a pivotal time in the wrestling business, with the WWF facing revelations of internal scandals and their standing as wrestling's top promotion no longer rock-solid, WCW began anew with a change of leadership. Kip Allen Frey replaced Jim Herd as Executive Vice President of WCW on Jan. 8, 1992. In the following "Torch Talk" interview conducted April 3, 1992. Mr. Frey talks about his feelings on his first three months with WCW, including where he thinks WCW stands today, what improvements he feels have taken place since he joined WCW, and what plans exist to further improve the organization.

Wade Keller: Looking at your first few months as Executive Vice President of WCW, are you happy with the progress of WCW thus far?

Kip Frey: Yeah. We've had a lot of good things happen. The main things that I was worried about when I first came in was I thought we were a long way away from where we needed to be as far as the look of our shows go. I thought we were almost embarrassing ourselves every week just by not having production values up to par. I'm real happy with that. I'm happy with having Jesse (Ventura) come on board. I'm happy with the direction we've started. Now it's just the process of having got here, having gotten my feet grounded and getting to know the people, I'm ready to go forward and start a longer term process of change.

Keller: As far as the looks of the programs, are you happy with changes that have already taken place or are you happy with what changes are coming up?

Frey: With what's coming up.

Keller: Were you unhappy with TBS, the syndicated programs, or both?

Frey: I can't say I was unhappy with it. The looks of our shows didn't seem to have the look of a company that was out there on the cutting edge of what's in the entertainment world right now. That's what I was worried about more than anything. For what we were doing, it wasn't all that bad. I just didn't think it was the image we should be portraying.

Keller: Taking the old World Wide Wrestling for example. What are some of the main changes you want to see with the new program?

Frey: On a couple of levels, I thought when it comes to the actual production of the matches there were some lighting and sound problems with them in the arenas. I thought our graphics

program looked old and tired. And I hated our music. Those have all been changed as of April 11. It will be called "WCW World Wide."

Keller: Will Jesse Ventura be permanent on both World Wide and WCW Saturday Night on TBS?

Frey: The co-host on WCW Saturday Night will change each week. The first one was with Jesse, I'm the guest on the second one, Dusty's guest on the third. The fourth one will be Bill Fralik of the Atlanta Falcons. We're going to have a variety of guests from then on in the entertainment and sports world.

Keller: The Fralik thing brings up a question. Do you believe that there needs to be more of a focus on your home base of Atlanta on your national programs or do you think there's too much of that?

Frey: There's going to be less of a focus on Atlanta.

Keller: Will that eliminate heavy plugs on TBS for the Omni shows as if the Omni shows are more important than other house shows?

Frey: That has already been eliminated.

Keller: In general, has running WCW been more difficult to operate in the first few months than you thought it would be going in?

Frey: The real problem I've had, and it really doesn't have much to do with wrestling, is that the company hasn't replaced me as a lawyer yet. I've literally been practicing law while I'm doing this and so I've almost been working half time on wrestling administration. I'm still the lawyer for the company, unfortunately. So that's been the worst part.

Keller: Has Dusty Rhodes had to pick up some of the slack?

Frey: No. Dusty has been doing only what he'll be doing in the future.

Keller: What's been pleasantly surprising so far?

Frey: The most interesting thing that I've found—and it's really me just not having been around wrestling—is the tremendous amount of pride these guys have in their work and the business itself. They really almost cherish this business. It's something they've shared for a long time. And seeing the amount of pride they have in the product, it's encouraging. All we have to do now is follow through and give them the vehicle to show their talents.

Keller: Do you feel the pride in WCW has come back after the spirit had been crushed before you came in?

Frey: I don't know. I wasn't there before. I can only observe what I see now.

Keller: What do you think have been the main pluses that you've been able to give to

WCW, even while splitting your time, that were not in WCW before you arrived, either from your own observations or from what other people have told you?

Frey: I guess that what I've done is everyone has been forced to look at our product through a new set of eyes. It's very much like making a movie. You sit and you edit a movie for days and days and weeks and weeks. And the first time you look at it with an audience in the room, it's a completely different feeling because you're looking at it through their eyes. Now, everyone in our production department and everyone in our booking department—everyone throughout the whole company—really, just as a function of me being there, are looking at our product in a new way trying to bring fresh ideas. I think they're excited again about it.

Keller: Switching gears to steroids, do you think your voluntary compliance policy is working now that it's been in effect six months? Are you happy with the visual progress or, more importantly, the response from wrestlers and other personnel?

Frey: It's hard to categorize because people have reacted to it in different ways. A lot of people have reacted very positively to it. Others really haven't focused on it yet because we haven't had our first, kind of, team meeting with the doctors. And that's going to come up in the next couple of weeks. That's really going to be when they first start paying serious attention to it.

Keller: Have you sensed that some, who started out with compliance, are frustrated already with a lack of compliance by others? For instance, Marcus Bagwell and Scott Steiner aren't any smaller than before the policy began?

Frey: Let me take Bagwell for example. The other day he came up to me and said he has been putting in much more time in the gym because he is off of them. He's really concentrating on not getting too small because he wants to keep that look and wants to keep it naturally. That's the kind of reaction that I think is positive. Time will tell whether that is a sincere reaction. I have no reason to believe it's not... The situation is, the policy is in place, the policy gives us a six month period to see what happens. I don't want to jump the gun evaluating it after a month and a half.

Keller: How about the public service announcements? What's been the reaction to those thus far?

Frey: I've gotten a lot of positive reaction to it. There's an occasional negative reaction to an individual one because people don't like this or that. But the overall response has been real positive. I've gotten a lot of calls from people who are glad to see it because of the effect it's having on kids.

Keller: Do you think the wrestlers should admit their previous steroid use openly on the

announcements?

Frey: Absolutely. In fact, we just did one with Josh. I don't remember his exact words, but what I remember him saying was simply, "I've been there, I've done the steroids, it was a mistake, and I wish I hadn't done them now."

Keller: Are you going to do that with more of the wrestlers?

Frey: Yes.

Keller: Shifting to arenas. What is WCW's status with the Meadowlands Arena and what is the status of WCW getting into Madison Square Garden?

Frey: Well, as I understand it, we're not going to be in the Meadowlands at least for the near future. We're looking at other places, but it's not far enough along where I can really talk about it now.

Keller. Speaking generally then, using Madison Square Garden as just a case example, legally is it possible for the arena to prevent WCW from running shows in those arenas? Is it legally possible for you to force access?

Frey: In general, there are situations in which buildings can choose not to do business with other entities. The bottom line and the position I've taken from the beginning is that as our product improves people will want to deal with us. I really don't believe that anyone has seen the improvement in our product they can expect simply because it hasn't cycled into the system yet. As our product gets better, I believe then when I go back to the arenas and say, "Look, we're doing this and this and this, we've improved here and here and here," that's when I believe deals will begin to be struck.

Keller: What was your reaction to the success or lack of success of SuperBrawl?

Frey: SuperBrawl had the largest number of buys we've had in the last eight pay-per-views. The final numbers aren't in, but it did around a 1 percent buyrate. The universe has gotten so much larger that the buyrate percentages are going down. So I think it's more enlightening to talk in terms of the number of buys.

Keller: As homes become wired for pay-per-view, wouldn't those homes be more likely to purchase a pay-per-view event because of the novelty of it, thus shouldn't pay-per-view buyrates increase as the universe expands?

Frey: Well, that may be true theoretically. What I think is happening, and I don't have any data to back this up, but I think the homes that are coming on now are more in the rural areas that wouldn't have had TBS before because they didn't have cable before and also wouldn't have the syndicated show in the area. So, as I said, I don't know that for fact, but it makes sense to me. New York isn't just coming on line here and

other major cities. We're seeing new homes added where the wrestling product hasn't had a way to get to these people yet, so it might take a little longer for people to grow into the product.

Keller: We talked about some of the improvements or changes coming up. What are some of those changes that are a couple of months away that you can talk about now?

Frey: We've started a program here in Atlanta and it's going to grow to nationwide status. We've been working with the Atlanta Housing Authority and Teddy Long has been going to a different housing project each week taking wrestlers with him and having the wrestlers talk to the kids in the community about staying in school, staying away from drugs, and that kind of thing. We're going to be doing that on a nationwide basis to make that contact with the community and get our name out there. We're going to be sending wrestlers ahead to all of the towns we're booked in to to do some P.R. there and community work and that type of thing. That will be exciting.

Keller: You've added Ventura, Flamingo, in the future Williams and Gordy. Are you looking at adding other talent or are you content for the time being?

Frey: We're looking at several other people, but I can't get into it. I'm just not sure what stage they're at. Terry Allen's (a/k/a Magnum T.A.) in charge of that. When he and Dusty decide on someone they want to look at, he's the one who contacts them.

Keller: It might be much too early to evaluate him, but up to this point are you happy with Dusty Rhodes's performance as booker and does there seem to be satisfaction by others with how well he is doing or is there the usual dissent?

Frey: There doesn't seem to be any dissent. I'm very happy with what he has been doing. I think he's got a lot of really good things coming up. Again, a lot of what he's done in the last three months really was determined months before I came in. My relationship with Dusty has been real good. I'm happy with what he's doing and I expect things to continue to get better.

Keller: It seems there's been a lot of concern, at least from what people are saying to me, with the number of appearances you've been making on television and the references to your name. Some people have gone as far as saying you're being portrayed as WCW's number one babyface. Are you concerned with this?

Frey: You know, I just do what they tell me to do. Ultimately, I think there may be a little bit of a kind of, "Let's do the boss a favor here." I don't expect to be on that much in the future. I was a guest host on one of the shows we did. I don't know, it's one of those things where—it's like when you get a new toy, everyone wants to play



Jesse Ventura

Wade Keller

with it. I expect that that will calm down as the novelty wears off.

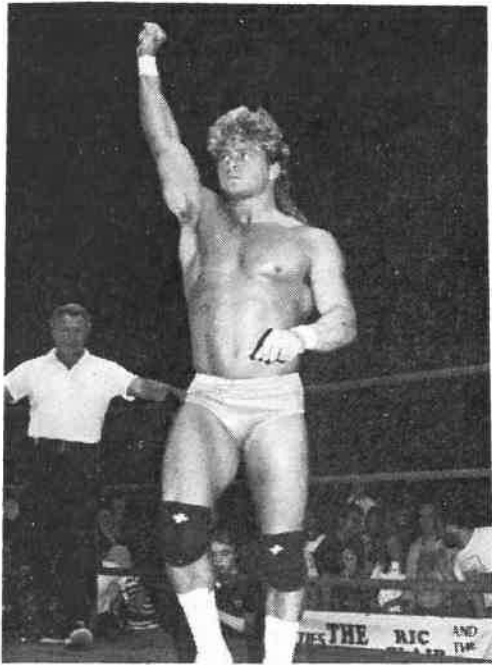
Keller: Do you have any plans to pull WCW in a very deliberate fashion out of the shadow of the WWF's bad image, the bad image the WWF is shedding on professional wrestling in general? In other words, are there plans to really proclaim your strengths in comparison to the WWF's weaknesses?

Frey: There's not a plan to try to capitalize on what's going on in the WWF. What's happening there is unfortunate. It's not something where I think anyone can gain by taking advantage of the situation. I think what we have to do is concentrate on what we do well, try to do it as best we can, and hopefully the comparisons will be favorable.

Keller: So you're worried more with the long-term image than the impression people might get over the next few months of pro wrestling in general from all of the mainstream coverage of the scandals?

Frey: I'm worried about it, but I don't think there's necessarily anything I can do about it. I don't think in any business the way to succeed is by emphasizing the perceived defects of your competitor. I think the way to succeed is by emphasizing your strengths and the good things you do.

Keller: Looking even longer term on a pessimistic side, what do you think it is going to take for Dusty Rhodes to no longer be booker? What would need to go wrong? A lot of people want to know how long WCW will wait for a turnaround and how much of a



Brian Pillman

Wade Keller

turnaround is needed for the patience with Dusty Rhodes to continue?

Frey: Dusty is not under a timetable or a deadline. He's not under some litmus test of whether he's going to stay or leave. Dusty is my booker for the foreseeable future and, you know, obviously in any business, the people above me are saying someday if I screw up bad enough, I'm gonna be gone. But I don't think they're expecting me to screw up and I'm not expecting to screw up. Maybe some day I'll need to address that situation, but it's not right now.

Keller: What has been your impression of the wrestling newsletters, specifically the main few weeklies?

Frey: I've read some. I don't know. I think it's like anything else. If I were asked to write about what's going on at IBM, I might have a lot of great ideas that sound great on paper, but I would have no way of even imagining the complexity of trying to implement some of those ideas and some of the reasons—as absolutely reasonable as that might sound in the abstract, when they could never be done. I think there's a lot of really earnest thought that goes into it, but to some extent, I don't believe someone who's not actually a part of actually running the business and watching the dollars flow through the company, it's very hard to come up with suggestions that are relevant to all of the concerns that we face here.

Keller: Would you like to see more of an understanding of that when suggestions were made, such as qualifying them?

Frey: No, I don't think there's anything that can be done. I think they're fine in what they are. What they are is an outsider's view of what can be done. In some instances, there are some good

ideas that come out of the suggestions that are made. But for the most part, they're pretty naive to the complexities of a big company.

Keller: How about satisfaction with the accuracy?

Frey: Nothing sticks out in my mind as having been wildly wrong that I've read in print. Some stories ended up being dead wrong, but I could kind of piece together at the time they were reported, they probably seemed right. But no, I don't have any complaints about accuracy.

Keller: What about the status of Jim Crockett? There have been some conflicting reports.

Frey: Jim doesn't work here in the office anymore. It was really just a situation that amounts to a philosophical difference in doing business, really, with me, although I got along with Jim pretty well. As far as his status right now, there are some elements of his status that are confidential and I can't expose. He is not a part of the day-to-day operations right now.

Keller: Finally, there were a lot of complaints and a lot of concern about Brian Pillman's interview at the Clash previewing his match against Jushin Liger at SuperBrawl. There was concern that WCW was taking a real life issue, Japan bashing, and turning it into a wrestling angle when the theme of wrestling for so long has been to exploit and mock minorities and other nationalities in angles, and the strong concern was that Pillman's anti-Japanese interview in an instance where Liger wasn't a heel wrestler, he was simply a fantastic athlete, fell into the pattern of pro wrestling falling into the paradigm of wrestling being sort of sleazy and capitalizing on racial issues instead of the talent of the two wrestlers. Did you feel a backlash or did you feel the angle Pillman took was inappropriate?

Frey: I thought the interview itself was kind of at the borderline of what would be acceptable. I thought the way Brian handled himself at SuperBrawl itself was very good. He ended up shaking hands and it was a nice touch. It's the only Japan situation that I can think of.

Keller: Will Japan bashing take place in the future, such as when the Steiners promote their match against their Japanese opponents at WrestleWar?

Frey: I don't think there're any plans to do any Japan bashing with the Steiners.

Keller: Is the door open for that in the future if you thought it would add to an angle and help sell it?

Frey: I don't know that Japan bashing would sell at all. I think that there is a natural nationalist pride that you can play on in the sense that you cheer the U.S. team in the Olympics against any other team. But I don't think there are any other plans to specifically target the Japanese as objects of scorn.

Jim Crockett...

During the years of great change in the '80s, the most formidable rivals to Vince McMahon and Hulk Hogan were Jim Crockett, Dusty Rhodes, and Ric Flair. The "Torch Talk" with Crockett remains the only interview of its kind. It chronicled the Crockett expansion years where he went from one of the top regional territories to the second largest promotion in the country with national exposure.

The timing of the interview with Crockett was a key to his openness. He had been all but told by WCW "we don't need you." As he said in the interview, they paid him to do nothing. When the interview took place, he was at the tail end his contract with WCW and wanted to prove he wasn't a has-been without any valid ideas for the current wrestling scene.

Although he was a little coy about it at the time (because legally he had to be), he had long been planning to start a new promotion to compete with WCW and the WWF. He was going to start the company with the help of long time friend Jim Hudson and use Paul Heyman as his booker, his "new Dusty Rhodes."

It was a time in his life when he was inspired and reflective at the same time. The reason the interview turned out as good as it did, the reason Crockett came across as openly critiquing his strengths and weaknesses as a promoter, is because he was in the mode of reflecting.

In order for his proposed project, which would be known as the World Wrestling Network in its short life, to work he had to make an honest assessment of what lessons he had learned in the past and how not to repeat his mistakes. That reflective mood result in a lot of wisdom coming from a historically quiet person.

The one thing he didn't talk about in the interview was how he wasn't willing to lose money this time around in order to have a chance at making big money. When it came time to put up, Crockett wasn't willing to put enough at stake in order to be taken seriously. One thing led to another and Jim Hudson pulled out of the project, Paul Heyman decided to stay with ECW and become a partner with Tod Gordon, and Crockett joined the NWA and tried to relive the past on a low budget that forced him into being nothing but a bit player in Dallas and the latest promoter to fail trying to run a business out of the Sportatorium.

Crockett, it seemed, really never was serious about doing something all that significant, at least not serious in the sense that he had a realistic idea of what that would take in terms of time, finances, and guts, and thus never really had a chance to become a major player.

Nonetheless, for those who followed wrestling closely throughout the McMahon-Crockett war of '84, the strive to survive '85, Crockett going national in '86, the bitter national pay-per-view battles in '87, the problems he had in '88, and the selling out to Turner just a short time later, this

"Torch Talk" was a fascinating look behind the scenes at those years.

One of the better elements of the interview was that Crockett did seem to be honest in assessing the weaknesses of his promotion in comparison to the WWF, while also giving himself credit for his strengths. He seemed to be very aware in retrospect of what went wrong, rather than bitter and angry and irrational about the past. Then again, perhaps that's because he sold out to Turner and didn't go bankrupt as others did.

Christopher Cruise...

At the time of the Chris Cruise interview, it was a pretty big deal because no one had done a "Torch Talk" while they were actually working for WCW. Cruise, perhaps naively, thought it would be good for his career to get his name in print and compliment a few of his colleagues along the way. What he didn't realize, or didn't care to realize, was that the wrestling business then (and still now) liked its privacy and didn't want light shed on their business practices. To do an interview with such a publication seemed like an endorsement of that publication.

Politically, it didn't do tremendous damage to Cruise, who went on to have a strong run as host of World Wide Wrestling with Terry Funk as his co-host. But it did make people wary of him and may have slowed his progress in joining the clique of announcers.

He wasn't entirely honest in his interview as he was more complimentary of some of the announcers during the interview than he was in private conversations. He did show he had a knack for publicity. He was careful and savvy in the way he answered questions.

The memory that stays with me about his interview is how pro-pro wrestling he was. He, more than anything, did seem genuine in his appreciation for the wrestling industry and was almost giddy that he was employed full time in wrestling. That kind of enthusiasm is not as prominent as it probably should be in wrestling.

Paul E. Dangerously...

Two "Torch Talks" with Paul E. are republished in this book. He has two other "Torch Talks," one in a Torch Annual and another in more recent *Torches*. Paul E. took a route into the business that lead to him being more accepting of the wrestling press than most. Through good times and bad, Paul has remained loyal to the idea of honest coverage of the industry. One reason he has lasted so long without losing his acceptance or respect for that coverage is that he is so able to spin a story his way, or get publicity (especially from the *Torch*) for projects before they are even viable, or explain his way out of a tough situation in a persuasive, largely believable way. Those who aren't able to explain their side of the story (or don't bother to take the time) often get frustrated. Others are good at explaining their side, but sometimes the truth still finds a way of overwhelming their rationalizations to the point that they have to turn away from the honest coverage and begin badmouthing it.

Paul's path into the business was through running fanzines in the late-'70s, shooting photos, hanging around wrestlers and becoming a familiar face, getting into magazine publishing, and eventually breaking into wrestling as an announcer and a manager. Because he took that path, he identifies with those who are active in covering wrestling. He's travelled their roads, to one degree or another.

An example of Paul E.'s ability to represent himself advantageously in print is evident in his first "Torch Talk." In the first interview he talks about how he broke into wrestling. Every wrestler I interview has a different story to tell, and while some paths are similar, no two paths to success are the same.

In the second interview, Paul E.'s spinning is evident. Paul E.'s mouth has always been his best friend and his enemy at the same time. He spent the early years of his career known as a hothead with a big mouth. That mouth got him a reputation in the business very quickly, but it was also that mouth that got him into the business. But besides his mouth often getting him into trouble, he also proved to be a master spinner, able to use his mouth to get him out of situations also, to be able to rationalize or explain

his way out of many situations.

When he was beginning his WWN project, he was careful not to make the same mistake others did when starting a so-called possible third big national promotion by saying he wasn't going to talk in big terms about his plans. While he said that, though, the idea still came across that he was thinking big. It was important for it to come across that WWN could become big because that would lead to wrestlers wanting to get on the bandwagon early.

Paul E. is sometimes too calculated sounding in his interviews, talking slowly and deliberately as if to be sure he doesn't misspeak. That interview style is in contrast to his free-flowing nature when not talking "for the record." Even so, the strong points of his interviews are his outlook and overview of the industry. For instance his analysis of how Monday Night Raw, just an infant of a program at the time of the interview, was structured to draw ratings but not deliver as a result strong attendance figures at house shows. That turned out to be very true and remains a dilemma for the WWF today.

Paul has said after his interviews that he learns a lot from talking out the issues he is asked about. It always makes for a stronger interview when one takes the interview process as a learning experience, not a mere regurgitation of memory.

Ted DiBiase...

The portion of the Ted DiBiase interview that runs in this book is the installment that ran in the weekly *Torch*. The rest of the extensive interview ran in the 1993 *Torch Yearbook*. In this segment, DiBiase came across as very family no-oriented and resigned to his diminished role in the industry. He didn't seem excited about the business anymore, but did seem to have tremendous respect for his years in the ring. He seemed at peace with the idea that his injury might end his in-ring career.

Shane Douglas...

As opposed to Derrick Dukes, Shane Douglas in this early interview came across as a student of the game. It was apparent Douglas had thought about the state of the business and mulled over ideas for improving it. He even showed early stages of a genuine brashness that eventually led to his genuine brash interviews on ECW and most recently WWF television. It was interesting to re-read him saying that he would like to eventually work for the WWF and end his career there. He may get that wish, after all.

As a trivia note, the Douglas interview to this day is the only "Torch Talk" that was conducted in person rather than on the phone.

Derrick Dukes...

As opposed to Shane Douglas, Derrick Dukes didn't seem excited about his future in wrestling. When asked about his future outside of wrestling he had a ready-made answer. He had just been through a run in the AWA and didn't seem to have a fire inside of him as a result of what he was exposed to there. This interview, in contrast to Douglas's interview during the same time period, in a capsule illustrates why Shane is where he is and why Derrick is where he is (out of wrestling).

Bill Eadie...

Bill Eadie had a lot of experience to draw upon for his interview and was one of the true surprises in terms of what I expected from an interview versus what I got. He didn't come across all that progressive or even excited about the business; he did, though, have an aura of having seen it all and seemed to have seen it all through rational eyes. He seemed a little bitter about the industry not remaining loyal to him when talking about not becoming a road agent for the WWF.

He was one of the first to see the big money potential in Lightning (1-2-3) Kid, he talked about younger wrestlers needing to learn the fundamentals of in-ring wrestling, he seemed to express the common sense, middle ground approach to blood, steroid use, and unions in the industry, and overall gave a calm, authoritative look at the industry.

VERNE GAGNE

Verne Gagne has held the AWA World Title more times than anyone. He has also promoted for the AWA for over two decades. Recently the AWA has hit down times, but they were the hottest promotion for a couple of years in the early '80s and have found success through most of the last 30 years. Those years will be remembered for a long time by fans who saw their cards. At sixty-plus years old, Verne continues to promote. In the following "Torch Talk," Verne reminisces about his career and gives his opinions on the changes the sport has undergone in recent years.

Wade Keller: When did you originally start to follow wrestling?

Verne Gagne: When I was a little boy listening to it on the radio with my grandfather. I remember Bronco Nagurski, Sandor Szabo, gee wiz, let's see, this is a long time ago... Cliff Gustafson, Abe Kashey, Dirty Dick Raines.

Keller: When did you become interested in actually getting involved in pro wrestling yourself?

Gagne: Well, I wrestled in high school. I wrestled at the University of Minnesota. I played football also at both places and then went right into professional wrestling.

Keller: How many years did you wrestle professionally?

Gagne: Thirty-five.



Verne Gagne

Wade Keller

Keller: What era of your career was your most favorite?

Gagne: Well, I can't say. Each era has its own fun, its own little mystique, it's own memories. When I first started out, I went down to Texas and wrestled. I was the Junior Heavyweight Champion in Oklahoma. But it was for the NWA, so I travelled all around the country with that for about a year. Then it got too hard to hold my weight down. So I went to Chicago and wrestled out of there for about nine years. Then I came back here in about 1960.

Keller: And that's when the AWA formed?

Gagne: Right. It was about 1958 or '59, sometime in there. Lou Thesz (NWA Champion) was really picking his spots. He wouldn't wrestle. So a group of promoters got tired of that. They had a rule where you couldn't lose a title on disqualification. So, they said in Chicago if I got disqualified against Carpentier they would recognize Carpentier as champion. Thesz got himself disqualified. So the other promoters, there were about seven or eight of them, said that was enough. They recognized Carpentier as World Champion. Then I beat him in Oklahoma.

Keller: Who did you enjoy wrestling the most through the years?

Gagne: (Laughs) Enjoy wrestling?

Keller: If you possibly could enjoy wrestling someone?

Gagne: Oh, sure you can enjoy wrestling someone. I don't think you'd be in it if you didn't. I think the one I enjoyed the most as far as pitting skills against skills was Billy Robinson. There were a lot of great wrestlers. Pat O'Connor, Eduard Carpentier, Wilbur Snyder. Those were who we called clean wrestlers, those who did not resort to rough tactics.

Keller: Was Robinson the toughest wrestler you ever faced?

Gagne: Yeah, he was one of them. Without a doubt.

Keller: Of all your years in wrestling, what was your most memorable night?

Gagne: Well, I tell ya', there was one in White Sox Park in Chicago in my later career when I won the World's Title back from Nick Bockwinkel. That wasn't too long ago, in the late-'70s or early-'80s.

Keller: Do you enjoy promoting as much as being active in the ring?

Gagne: Well, the one thing about wrestling promoting—doing both—you have more of a feel for the fans, what they're kinda looking for, what they want. I'm a little divorced from that because I don't go to the arenas that often around the country. I used to always be there and get the feel for the crowd, and what they're looking for, what they like, what they don't like, and so on. That

was a plus doing both.

Keller: Do you have any bitter feelings toward the sport, whether it's because of the WWF or maybe recent down years?

Gagne: Not toward the sport, no. The people within it make for that. Not the sport itself. It's been great to me and good to so many people. That's why I spent so much time bringing in people. I've probably coached, brought into wrestling, or developed probably 75 to 100 people who have had a big influence on wrestling in America and throughout the world.

Keller: Who were some of the wrestlers you've worked with?

Gagne: Let's see. First it was Larry Hennig I trained. Baron Von Raschke, Curt Hennig, The Iron Sheik, Greg Gagne, Jim Brunzell, Ken Patera, Bob Backlund, Chris Taylor, Brad Rheingans, Ricky Steamboat, Sgt. Slaughter, Buddy Rose, The Anderson Brothers, Buddy Wolfe, and Lars Anderson. Comin' down we developed The Midnight Rockers, Hulk Hogan—and he quit, wouldn't give me a chance. I made him what he is. And we've got Scott Norton now.

Keller: I remember seeing in your movie, "The Wrestler," the part where you were instructing at the first day of training camp. Was that scene pretty similar to what actually went on at your camps?

Gagne: Oh yeah. Others I've worked with include Steve O, Buck Zumhoff (laughs)... Rick Steiner...

Keller: What wrestler you trained surprised you the most by being successful?

Gagne: Who I didn't think would make it that made it? I think Ric Flair made it bigger than I thought he would. He weighed about 300 pounds. Then we got his weight down. And he's done very, very well. I didn't think he would do that well.

Keller: How about the flip side. Who looked like he would be tremendous who wasn't successful?

Gagne: I thought Chris Taylor. Of course, poor Chris didn't get much of a chance because of a short career. But I mean Chris came in with a big amateur reputation. Unfortunately he passed on before he had a chance to develop. That was not his fault, certainly. I think we could have expected big things out of Chris down the road. For the short time he was in, he was hurt a lot. He was 6-5 and 450 pounds, so there was a great potential there.

Keller: Do you think that Vince McMahon's moves around 1984 crossing the promotional boundaries and expanding has been good for the sport?

Gagne: No. It's confining it. There are a lot of wrestling promoters who are not even in business. They can't promote. So there are a lot

of wrestlers who can't make a living and are out of it. There used to be 26 different promotions in the country. Now there's only three or four that are making money. It's always been a very hard sport to promote. But McMahon took advantage of what had taken us 20, 25 years to build to that point where we really had it rolling and where television was again interested in wrestling. So he took advantage of what we built, took all of our people, and then put them to his use.

Keller: Did you see it coming? Did you think he could have built an empire like he has or did you think he would outspend himself?

Gagne: I don't think that anybody realized he was going to expand as much as he did and how he did it. I guess anybody could have done it had he not been loyal, or respected our fellow promoters. He didn't respect anybody and he never had had any respect for anybody. He built by taking all my people, announcers, wrestlers, right down to the ring men, the office personnel, the whole damn thing. So he turned it around and brought it back in here. He brought my people back here into Minnesota, so we became the strangers in town and they became the people who are well known. But it wasn't a very nice thing to do. He could have bought it (the AWA). He could have done anything else. No big deal.

Keller: With all the changes in the '80s, where do you see wrestling going in the '90s? Do you see Vince gaining more ground or do you see the smaller territories coming through again?

Gagne: I don't think so. They won't be back for a long time, maybe never. Certainly we're moving forward. Things are certainly better for the AWA now than they were two years ago. We're moving forward with a new concept. It takes a long time to develop new wrestlers. But the wrestling fan is a funny person. He thinks if he hasn't seen that person around for five to ten years, then he's not a star. We've got some people right now. Scott Norton, the arm wrestling champion of the world, we'll back him.

Keller: In the early-'80s obviously the AWA was the promotion in the country, the most successful and most talked about, and the hottest ticket in town in St. Paul and in other cities. What do you attribute that to?

Gagne: Hard work. Development. Developing wrestlers. Developing the right announcers. Developing the right approach to the public and the whole thing. Which, when they're all taken away, you have to rebuild them, and it takes so damn... it took me 25, 30 years to build that. So you don't build it over night.

Keller: So you're willing to give it another 10, 15 years?

Gagne: It won't take that long. But we're doing it and we're seeing results already.

Keller: What do you think about Ted

Turner's involvement in the NWA now?

Gagne: I don't know if they're floundering or not. They don't seem to be going (as far as they should) with the talent they have. I don't know, though, they might be doing fantastic. I haven't the least idea.

Keller: What is the favorite part of your current day to day job?

Gagne: The challenge.

Keller: I'm going to mention some people and you can give me a few thoughts on each... Nick Bockwinkel...

Gagne: He was one of the best. All-around in the ring, out of the ring, there were none better than Nick Bockwinkel. I would like to say at times I would have liked to kill him. He was a very tough competitor, but conducted himself as a gentleman, not in the ring, but out of the ring. In the ring, he would resort to anything to get a victory.

Keller: Gene Okerlund...

Gagne: I think he's one of the best announcers in the business. In wrestling today there's probably none better. As far as him personally, no comment.

Keller: Marty O'Neil...

Gagne: One of the best. One of the greatest gentlemen I've ever met in my life.

Keller: Wally Karbo...

Gagne: (Pause)... Wally was Wally, period.

Keller: Bruiser Brody...

Gagne: Probably got what he asked for.

Keller: Hulk Hogan...

Gagne: Jerk Hogan, I guess.

Keller: Do you think Hulk Hogan has been good for the sport, or do you think the sport would have been better without him?

Gagne: Well, I think he came along at a very opportune time. You take a person who has not done anything, and then turn him around, and then make something out of him, and then he walks out on ya'. Your feelings are sorta mixed. Once we showed him the right way to express himself in the ring, on his interviews, and all that, the light went for him, and certainly he took to it. I can't say I'm exactly pleased. I mean, he walked out on us. He walked out on us. He promised us a lot of things. We agreed on things verbally, shook hands on it, and he walked away from it. I don't like him for that reason. As far as the public image goes of him, we developed that for him, and of course he expanded on that with the other exposure he's had with the WWF.

Keller: What is in Verne Gagne's future? Do you honestly have a set date for when you plan to move into something else?

Gagne: Nope. No way.

(Vince McMahon) didn't respect anybody and he never had had any respect for anybody. He built by taking all my people, announcers, wrestlers, right down to the ring men, the office personnel, the whole damn thing.

Keller: Okay, what else do you do now besides wrestling. I know you're into charities, tennis tournaments?

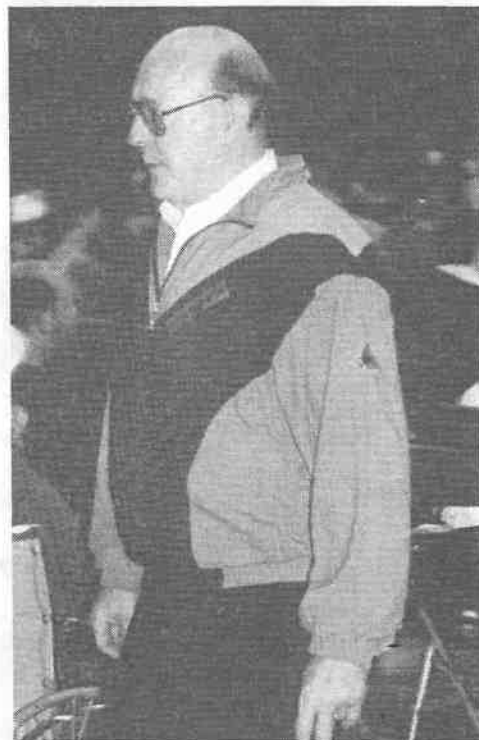
Gagne: Yeah, we do a lot of that. I've got grandkids and I've got all the things I've always done. I ski in the winter time. I play a lot of tennis, both for fun and we do a lot of tennis charity games. We've got a Ronald McDonald golf tournament coming up in September that Dave Kasper has. I like watching the amateurs develop. I've got my family. I go hunting and fishing. I've got a lot of things to do.

Keller: And finally, everyone wants to know, will Verne Gagne come out of retirement one more time?

Gagne: (Laughs) No, I don't think he will.

Keller: Even with what the Sheik's been doing?

Gagne: Even with the Sheik. I'll have to do it some other way. But who knows? (Laughs) I'll leave you with that.



Verne Gagne

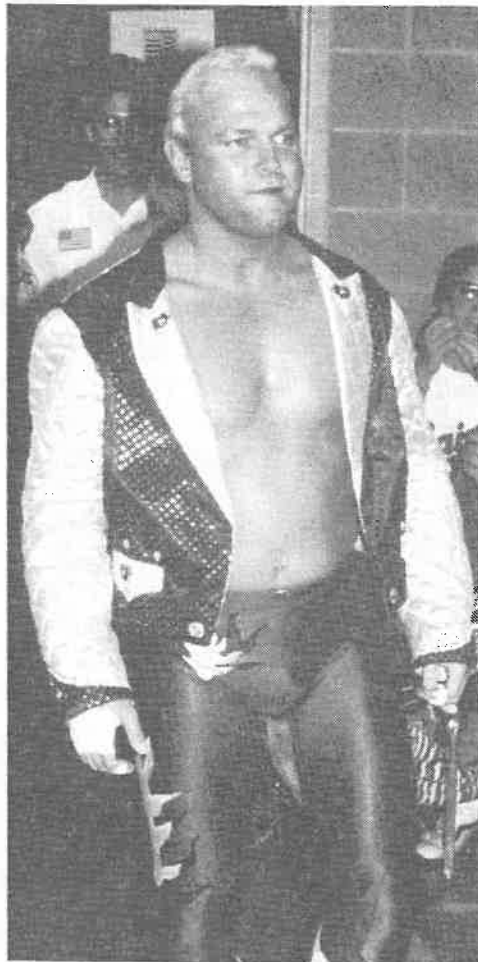
Wade Keller

EDDIE GILBERT

Eddie Gilbert turned Memphis into the most talked about promotion in newsletters. Eddie Gilbert's presence and influence has tripled the demand for video tapes of the WMC Saturday show between newsletter readers. Gilbert's brawls with Jerry Lawler have been mentioned as match of the year candidates, not to mention feud of the year. The newsletters have let Eddie Gilbert know what they think of his work, but what does he think of our work?

Two weeks ago "Torch Talk" presented Jim Ross's thoughts on the 1986 rise and the 1987 sale of Bill Watts's UWF. Eddie Gilbert, who was a top heel and booker for the UWF while learning about wrestling under the wing of Bill Watts, has a differing view of what happened during the expansion of Mid-South to the UWF and what led to its sale to Jim Crockett Promotions, now WCW. How do Gilbert's thoughts differ from Jim Ross's?

In the following "Torch Talk" with Eddie Gilbert conducted in September 1990, Gilbert answers both questions and more in detail.



Eddie Gilbert

Wade Keller

Wade Keller: How did you get started in professional wrestling?

Eddie Gilbert: I've wanted to be a wrestler since I was about four years old, even before my dad ever started wrestling. I was four years old in kindergarten and I started watching watching wrestling every Saturday morning on Memphis TV. My dad didn't start wrestling until he was 28. I always wanted to be a wrestler, so I started taking pictures at my dad's matches when he started. In 1973 (at age 12) I started writing for wrestling magazines. I went up through there and learned and trained with my dad and in 1979 I made my start right after high school. I graduated on a Friday night and wrestled the next morning, Saturday morning.

I started in Memphis for four months. Me and my dad were partners. I went from there to Kansas City on my own. I was 18. I wrestled there six months, and then from there I went to Atlanta for just about three months. Bill Watts was booking and he didn't know me. I probably weighed in at 180 pounds. I finished up there and came back to Memphis, this was 1980. I stayed there until the summer of '81. I went to the Oklahoma area with Leroy McGuirk, that was when Watts and McGuirk split up. Me and Ricky Morton teamed up and won the Tri-State Tag Team Titles. My first title was in '79, though, with my dad. I came down for two shots and me and him won the U.S. Tag Team Titles from Seekford Stanky and Steve "Crusher" Lawler. Then Ricky and I worked together in Memphis until December of '81 where we won the Southern Tag Team Titles. Then I left and went to Puerto Rico with my dad. He was the assistant booker there, that was when—well—I always wanted to be booker, ever since I was a kid.

Keller: Did you not once accurately predict an entire card of outcomes to Jerry Jarrett when you were a kid?

Gilbert: I was riding together with my dad, Eddie Marlin, Jerry Jarrett, and Johnny Eagles. Jerry Jarrett was asking me about that night's card, like, "Who do you think is going to win this match and that match" and he was the booker. So I guessed the matches. Then he started asking me who I thought was the best tag team in pro wrestling at the time, and the AWA Tag Team Champs at the time were Ray Stevens & Nick Bockwinkel. I thought they were the greatest tag team ever. So that's who I said. He said, "What!" But I beat him on the predictions and he was the booker. He told me that night, and I was about 12. "Eddie, when you turn 18, you come see me and I'll give you a job in the office." I was like, "Wow!"

I always wanted to be booker, so when we were in Puerto Rico wrestling the Moondogs a lot, my dad being the assistant booker had a two week vacation. I didn't know what he was going to do. He came and handed me his brief case and said, "Here, you handle it." I was 20 years old at

the time. So I was going into the office with Carlos Colon and of course everybody's favorite Jose Gonzales, who I hated then anyway. All the guys were older than I was, but I'd make out the card, give it to the guys, and give them instructions, and nobody ever gave me problems or anything. I never was one of these cocky kids, like, "My dad's the assistant booker, so you better listen to me."

Keller: You mean you were never like Paul E. Dangerously?

Gilbert: (Laughs) No. No, I wasn't. There was an NWA convention in Puerto Rico in 1982. This was where things started going pretty good for me. That is where I met Vince McMahon Sr. and Jim Barnet. They had an open meeting where some of the wrestlers could come, too. Bob Geigel, who was in Kansas City, came and gave me my break there. He said, "Well, young man, Eddie Gilbert, do you have anything to say?" I said, "Yes sir, I think that the junior heavyweight title should be used better." And I'm talking to all of these big shots from around the country at 20 years old. After the meeting was over, Vince McMahon Sr. called me up to the front and said, "Hello there, my name is Vince McMahon. Have you ever thought about going to New York?" I went, "Huh?" He said, "Give me a call later at the hotel."

Then, as I was going to the back, Jim Barnet stops me and says, "Have you ever worked Georgia?" I didn't want to say, "Yes sir, for two months, so I just said, "No sir." So he said, "My booker is Ole Anderson. Bring some pictures to me up here tomorrow morning and I'll sell 'em to Ole and I'll have a starting date if you'd like to go."

I went back up to my apartment and the phone rang. It was George Napolitano. He said, "Eddie, I've got somebody here who wants to talk to you." I asked who. He said, "Just hold on. Vince McMahon Sr. is on the phone with me." He said, "Eddie, have you ever been to Japan?" I said, "No sir, but I've always wanted to go." "Well, would you like to come to New York?" I said, "Yes, sir!" He said, "You call me next week and I'll give you a starting date if you'd like to come." "All right!"

So then I leave there. I go to the Holiday Inn to take the picture to Barnet. I was in Hog Heaven, being a kid, I have the two biggest promoters after me. I was like, "Wow!"

I take him the pictures and he says, "Ole says you can start in six weeks." Wow, okay, what do I do? My choice was New York (the WWF), of course, and I started there in October of '82. In May of '83 is when I had my car wreck and I was out for six, seven months. That's where I broke my neck. That's the reason I wear a beard, because I have scars under my chin from plastic surgery. My face all cut up, too, but plastic surgery was good enough around my nose and my cheeks, but it really scraped my face really

bad underneath. They didn't even know how bad it was. I was in intensive care for days, tough and go. Don Muraco was the guy who came to the hospital that night right after the wreck and stayed with me.

Keller: Was anyone in the car with you?

Gilbert: It was the same night that Jimmy Snuka's girlfriend died. Same night, same hospital and everything. Jimmy Snuka had just left the Allentown tapings with me, his girlfriend was at their room, I dropped him off at his room. I was going to Redding, Pennsylvania to the dinner that Vince Sr. had sometimes with different people. Me and Curt Hennig had gone to a couple of them. That night they asked me to go to this one, so I went back to my room to get showered, and I started on the road. I got about thirty miles and I was really tired. I had worked three times that night and I turned around and started back and that's all I remember. I ran into the back of an 18 wheeler. I had just bought a new Lincoln Town Car. That's all I'd ever wanted. It burned up. I don't even remember how I got out of the car. They found me in the back in the grass somewhere.

Well, anyway, I made it out of it and got back to workin' and decided that it was time to do something else. So in 1984 I was talking to Lawler who was booking in Memphis. That's when probably the worst decision I ever made in my life took place. Steve (Keirn) & Stan (Lane) left. He wanted me to become part of the new Fabulous Ones. I don't know if a lot of people know this or not, but before Tommy was chosen, it was going to be Brian Adias. Brian and I were going to be the new Fabs and Brian walked out, like five days before we were supposed to make our appearance. Tommy had just quit Atlanta and that's how Tommy got thrown into the thing. I remember back when Brian switched heel in Dallas, he was wearing those lightning bolts on his tights. Well, that's what that's from.

Tommy and I felt real, real bad doing the thing. We knew it wasn't going to work. But that's when the heel part of me came out. I always wanted to be a heel since I started. That's what I always wanted to be. So I finally talked him into letting me do the thing with Tommy. I switched and stuck it out through thick and thin with King Kong Bundy and Rick Rude and all the top heels left, I hung on and finally got to work the top program with Jerry Lawler, which I always wanted to do. He was my idol. I got to do that thing and then eventually came the lead to go to the UWF and Bill Dundee was booking there and hated me. I don't know how I lasted there. I guess I decided I wasn't going to let him beat me, you know, run me off.

Keller: What was the situation with you and Dundee?

Gilbert: It just goes back to Tennessee when I started. It was just one of those things. Even

when I burned Lawler and all those interviews when I talked about the Marlins and the Jarretts, well, it's a personal thing. All those interviews were shoots. I was really telling the truth. I'm just being honest. I think right now, me and Dundee, things are just fine. You see, I was a young kid and Dundee was real cocky. He'd smart off to me and I'd smart right back off to him. I was Paul E. Dangerously (laughs). I wanted to fight Dundee one night, too, in Louisville, Kentucky in '81. I got tired of his bullsh—. I said, "Come on, you big superstar, fight me." So ever since then there was some friction between us.

Keller: So how did you finally get your push in the UWF?

Gilbert: I hung on and on and hung on and Dundee was replaced by Dick Slater. Dicky finally gave me the chance. That's when I did the portrait thing where I was trying to give away the portrait of myself. Everything really got to working good. They started listening to a lot of my ideas.

Keller: What prompted Mid-South to change their name to UWF when they did?

Gilbert: The intent was to go nationwide.

Keller: How long was it between the name change and the merger with the Crockett's NWA?

Gilbert: Probably six months. Bill was getting ready to get in gear and Jim Ross was the one who sold us out. Bill had no intention of doing that. Jim Ross wanted to be on TBS. He wasn't thinking about our company and he set up a meeting with Jimmy Crockett about the time that we got ready to go with our tour and sold us out. He's the one who got the sell job.

I got a call one night from Ross and he said he got a call from Jimmy Crockett saying he would keep me booker here and Kevin Sullivan will still be booker in Florida, since they just bought that out. I'm thinking to myself, "Oh yeah, okay. You sold us out, you son of a bitch."

Keller: How did Ross allegedly have the power to do that?

Gilbert: He didn't have the power to do that. What he did was a sell job. He went there and said, "Look, would you be interested in buying it?" Then he went back to Bill and said, "Oh, guess what? I went and talked to Jimmy Crockett." And Bill at that time was getting ready to go through a divorce. I think Bill was getting tired of the business. Bill was having fun with me because I loved being around that man. I loved getting to learn, I loved doing my TVs, and him sitting with me and telling what was right and what was wrong. Most of the time I booked cards for house shows, he said, "Son, where have you been all this time?" And that made me (really proud) at that time, being 25 and thinking this man was God of Wrestling.

So when it got sold out, I felt robbed. I felt like

Bill (Watts) was getting ready to get (the UWF) in gear and Jim Ross was the one who sold us out. Bill had no intention of doing that. Jim Ross wanted to be on TBS. He wasn't thinking about our company and he set up a meeting with Jimmy Crockett about the time that we got ready to go with our tour and sold us out. He's the one who got the sell job.

the time for me to be taught by one of the greatest teachers ever was robbed by that buyout because Dusty (Rhodes) had no intentions of teaching. He just wanted to kill the place. I fooled them. I didn't let them do it.

Keller: If the UWF had not been sold, where do you see it today?

Gilbert: It was on its way to being national. Let me tell you what Bill Watts stated. He said if he had known that the houses would have been drawing and things that were done at the end there, he would have never sold it. That made me feel great. Up there in Minneapolis, we didn't do good, but we went through a swing like there at the Omni doing \$78,000 and the (Super) Dome did good on the swing, and Amarillo, Texas was sold out. I was buzzin' around going, "Wow!"

Keller: Is it true that the wrestlers were not happy drawing solid houses in smaller arenas and that prompted the move to bigger cities which did not draw as well?

Gilbert: It was a mistake to do it so soon. Atlanta was ready and the towns that did good, they were ready. But going to L.A. and Minneapolis, we weren't ready for that at all.

Keller: Do you agree with the theory that the UWF appealed only to hardcores and not to the casual fans?

Gilbert: I think at the time it did. I think as time went on, it wouldn't have. As time went on, we would have blended more into it to attract the casuals.

Keller: To whom do you give credit for the quick growth of the syndicated network of the UWF and why hasn't another promotion since been able to build such an impressive network?

Gilbert: It takes two to tango. The answer is

the show itself along with Jim Ross, who could sell an air conditioner to an Eskimo. That's the reason that he keeps his job. I'm being real honest. First of all, the show, I could sit there and think I did the greatest TV show there ever was, but Bill Watts, the way he would look at that show and say, "Okay, Eddie, you done good, but take this and move this down here and move this so it will get over better here, and move this to segment five." And when you look at that on that tape and that opening and the crowd reaction and the way it came off with the two guys with the headsets on them, it's great. The way the excitement of the crowd in Tulsa came across. Remember that excitement? Right then, to me, that was even more exciting than what the WWF was because that was natural, it wasn't fed in. It's also the unexpectedness and the southern style. It really got over with the TV viewers.

Keller: If you were to take over another promotion, what aspects of the UWF would you put into it versus the ones you wouldn't?

Gilbert: There is nothing I wouldn't do. I would do it exactly the same. When I was in Alabama and finally got Charlie Platt in a tux and we had the Montgomery Civic Center done, I think you saw the UWF there except for the headsets. Because I believe that was probably the best format for wrestling. But I also know, too, as you were talking about hardcores a while ago, is that what you see in Alabama was a regional thing. It would be the same, and there would be a lot of excitement, and it would have that UWF format, but you'd also see the soap opera entertainment. You wouldn't see the blood and guts and then a run-in every time, but you would see excitement in every segment. You'd never be bored.

Keller: Do you think that the UWF gave away too much on TV?

Gilbert: Yeah, there's been a lot of arguments about that. I would agree with that.

Keller: Like the time there were three title changes on one UWF show?

Gilbert: I know the show you're talking about. This was printed, but that was the one TV when Bill was getting really disappointed with Ken (Mantel) and his booking and Bill took over for that TV and he said, "This is the way we're going to do it." Bill was totally looking at his TV. He was so very proud of his TV that at that time he didn't worry about what it gave away. What he was worried about at that time was, "That's a hell of a wrestling show."

Keller: Speaking of Alabama, you wanted to expand Alabama's CWF promotion nationally when you were booker. Is that what led to your break-up with management in 1988?

Gilbert: My idea was maybe just branching off to Mississippi and Louisiana. What was happening was I knew that Alabama and that

But let me tell you, no wrestler wants to have a bad match and nobody goes out there to deliberately have a bad match, even Junkyard Dog. We know that he is nowhere up to par, but that man doesn't go out there to intentionally have a bad match. He thinks in his mind that he's having a good match.

Florida part, that those small spot shows couldn't hold up. They had been burned out by the Fuller syndrome. I thought if we could just maybe stretch over to Jackson, Mississippi which was a very, very hard town, but if there was any way we could get that and possibly get over into Louisiana, that's as far as I really wanted to go. Ronnie West's problem was it didn't matter what kind of houses we were drawing, whether they were good or bad, he wanted to be the booker, so it didn't matter. It didn't matter how I wanted to stretch the place, and I laid the game plan out because I knew we could get more talent that way. We just couldn't get the needed names to come into the CWF when we were running in Centerville, Alabama and small towns like that and only drawing \$2,000 gates. The Fullers had just given them horrible shows, so we needed to get into some bigger towns and come away with more money, and that was my idea. Of course, other (expansion) eventually could have happened, but that's as far as I wanted to go at the time.

Keller: To shift gears now, how do you feel professional wrestling journalistically should be covered?

Gilbert: Oh boy, this is great, because now I feel I'm finally getting to talk about something I've wanted to talk about. First off, if somebody was to really listen to what I'm about to say, especially the wrestlers and those inside wrestling, they will understand if they really think about it. We're in a new day and age, and looking at Ole Anderson's booking, we all realize that (laughs). But as far as wrestling bulletins go, they are here. It was such a hush, hush thing like five, four, or even three years ago. If you had (a newsletter) in the dressing room, it was, "Oh, please, hide it, don't let anybody know if you get it." If you had information, don't let anybody know where you got it. Wrestling's changed so much, and of course, people go to

Vince McMahon and say he's changed it, not the wrestling bulletins as far as getting across to the people that wrestling is a big part "entertainment."

I know I've talked about this to many wrestlers, especially lately. The wrestling fans who read the bulletins are diehard wrestling fans. They're going to be there to pay their money to get through the door. It doesn't matter what. They're the people we better be listening to. They're the people who go to bed thinking about it and get up thinking about it, just like everyone else. To me, it's a part of wrestling now. It's a part of wrestling that like a newspaper, you better read it every day if you get a chance to, to keep up on what's going on, how people feel, whether it's Steve Beverly's "Matwatch" that's talking about TV ratings, whether it's reading yours to find out what good "Hot News" things you've written up or a "Torch Talk" you got with a guy, or if it's Dave Meltzer's where you find out the dirt and about Japan and so forth. Because, like I said, those are the top three.

But what I'm saying is that it's the time where wrestlers, promoters, and offices better open up their eyes and open up their ears and accept wrestling bulletins. They better urge their wrestlers to read them.

Keller: What do you find is wrong with the newsletters?

Gilbert: The thing I want everyone to know that I get touchy about is when it comes to bulletins—it's not people's opinions, it's not their letters, it's not anything like that. The only thing I wish people would stay clear from would be when people go there and they're watching a wrestling card and they rate those matches. You have to remember it's not like a critic who goes to the movie and you see that movie one time and when the performance is finished, they don't have to do that movie again. (The wrestlers) have to do this every night. Who knows what guy's sick, what guy may have got the worst news in the world about his family, and because if it's good news about a guy, that's okay. If it's bad news, that guy's in trouble, but whenever you put in there it was the worst match in the world and negative stars, I just wish before somebody would give their opinion on something like that, they would take into consideration why that was. Maybe they had a cross-country flight and I know a lot of people have said that wrestlers are tired because of the schedule and all that. That's true.

But let me tell you, no wrestler wants to have a bad match and nobody goes out there to deliberately have a bad match, even Junkyard Dog. We know that he is nowhere up to par, but that man doesn't go out there to intentionally have a bad match. He thinks in his mind that he's having a good match. We all know he shouldn't be in the ring, but it affects people. Promoters or bookers, they read those things, when it comes to

rating the matches. I know it's always going to be that way, but I wish sometimes some consideration would be made that maybe something was wrong.

I know everybody has those wrestlers who they just don't like and are going to rate bad. But remember, that wrestler could have a wife and kids out there to feed and what they're writing about might be affecting their career. I'm telling you, because this is where bulletins are going, and I'm all for bulletins. A controversy is going to be started when this comes out, but it's about time. That's what I've always been involved in, controversy. Always take into consideration that and don't let your personal feelings affect the way you rate a match.

Keller: Aren't ratings a way of showing respect for those wrestlers who have gotten past any obstacles and had a great match rather than to necessarily punish those who for some reason were unable to produce a highly enjoyable match?

Gilbert: Wade Keller or Eddie Gilbert or Dave Meltzer or Steve Beverly or Paul E. Dangerously could see the same match, compare notes, and all be different. I don't think they're all going to agree.

Keller: But I think movie-goers, myself included, eventually find a critic or a person whose opinions they generally agree with. And generally, give or take a star, nearly always a great match is recognized as great and a really poor match is recognized as such, with the discrepancy being in the mid-range matches.

Gilbert: If two guys are out there and they, for the past week, have had hellacious matches and then they go to a city where someone's rating matches and they don't have that great a match, why not after saying it was a disappointing match, say, "I wonder why?" That's the point I'm getting at. There needs to be something else there. That's all.

Keller: Do you feel it could ever be accepted for a newsstand publication to be published with the editorial policy of current newsletters?

Gilbert: Boy, that's an interesting question. I don't know if this is going to haunt me. The way wrestling's changing, in five years I could see that.

Keller: Do you see that as a negative or do you see it benefiting wrestling.

Gilbert: The way wrestling is going and changing, I don't think it would hurt it. That's why bulletins today don't hurt it. Six years ago when I first read Dave Meltzer's I had a totally different opinion. That was about the time Vince was bringing about that, "Yes, guys get hurt, there is entertainment involved and there is more to it." Five years from now, I see it. I don't think wrestling magazines matter to the hardcore fans anymore.

EDDIE GILBERT

Eddie Gilbert is once again part of a controversy with WCW and is apparently the main reason Paul E. Dangerously was fired from WCW. The following is a "Torch Talk" conducted Oct. 13, 1991 featuring Gilbert's version of the last two weeks of events.

Wade Keller: Let's start with the Paul E. Dangerously situation. How did you get involved in the USWA the day after winning the Global TV Title?

Eddie Gilbert: Okay, before I went to Japan, I knew I would return and win the TV Title. So during that week around Monday, the week before the Memphis TV, I called and left a message on (Jerry) Lawler's machine. I told him I would be flying in from Dallas to Memphis to get my other car, so I said, "If you want me to come to TV, I can." I was going to stay at my mom and dad's house through Monday before leaving for Atlanta. I said, "If you don't want to do it, fine, too." So Tuesday (October 2) he gives me a call back and said he would like to work with me on Monday night. I said, "Great, but here's an added bonus, I get the TV title in Dallas that Friday night so we could do a title vs. title deal." So he asked if I could be at TV Saturday.

Later that day I called him back and asked him if they were doing a deal with WCW and he didn't even say yes or no. He just said, "How did you find out?" I said, "I know people who work in the office there, it's no big deal." And I didn't know anything else. When I talked to Jim Ross the week before I was supposed to start (with WCW) he gave me that lecture. He was trying to get Lawler to call the office then because he wanted him to work with Sting, and even have Luger work with Lawler in Memphis, a co-promotion, so it was no big deal to me. If they could work together, fine with me, I'd be happy for them. He got real defensive and that's when he said, "Hell, I ought to call Dusty Rhodes there right now and have him fire whoever leaked this." I said, "I wouldn't get too upset. I don't think too many people know." He got madder and didn't even want to talk about anything. So I said, "I'll see ya' Saturday." So he sounded pretty calmed down and everything when we got off the phone. Nothing else the rest of the week. I talked to him Friday night before our deal in Memphis the next morning and nothing else was said about the situation, the taping, about anybody managing anybody.

So I get to TV and we do the interview together talking about the titles and the match coming up. They ask me if I can work the loop in Evansville, Louisville, Nashville, so forth. I said yeah. We talked about doing a three week thing there with Lawler and me ending up being partners for two

weeks after we worked against each other. I agreed and thought it was pretty good. So I worked TV and then the weekend was over. Monday I get this call from Paul (E. Dangerously). It was early afternoon sometime and he said, "Eddie, have you checked your machine?" I said no. He said, "Eddie, I've been fired." I went, "What!? For what?" He said, "For talking to you." I said, "What?" I still couldn't understand what he was talking about. At first I think he thought Jerry Jarrett called Jim Barnet and told Barnet that it was Paul that talked to me. We come to find out later Jerry Jarrett called Jim Herd. Still, I'm not sure how it happened.

After the conversation with Jarrett and Herd Monday morning (October 7), they called Paul in and told him he should leave his duties with pay because he had talked to me and told me which was stupid because he hadn't done it, and if I told who actually told me it would be hilarious, almost. I don't think Paul knew at the time that Jim Ross had talked about it on the 900 line. So I called Lawler after Paul and I talked. Paul was shaken up pretty bad and I couldn't figure it out at all. I knew Lawler hated Paul when he started because Paul was young and cocky in Memphis and Lawler didn't like him because Paul talked back to him.

So I called Lawler and asked him what was going on, and I said, "Did you know Paul E. just got fired off this deal." He goes, "Why?" And I said, "Because somebody called up and told him that he was the one that told me." And Lawler said, "Well, was he?" And I said, "No." He said, "Well, Eddie, we can't take a chance on this getting out and if it gets in the stooge sheets, everybody will find out and Paul E. probably talks to them." And I said, "Wait a second, how is it Paul E.'s involved? Where are you getting your information?" He said, "Well that's how I figured it, since you two are friends because he probably called you if you really think about it." I said, "No, no, no. What's gonna happen is he lost his job, so don't you know they're going to cover it and do a story on this and ask why?" And he acted surprised and everything, like, "Who's gonna tell 'em?" I said, "Everybody." And he said something like, "Well they ought to fire everybody who talks to those stooge sheets. That guy in Jackson (Steve Beverly) talks to the *Commercial Appeal* and everybody around here would know about me and Luger." I said, "What you've done is open a can of worms now. They're gonna know now." And he acted like he didn't know that and I don't think he really did. I think he messed up.

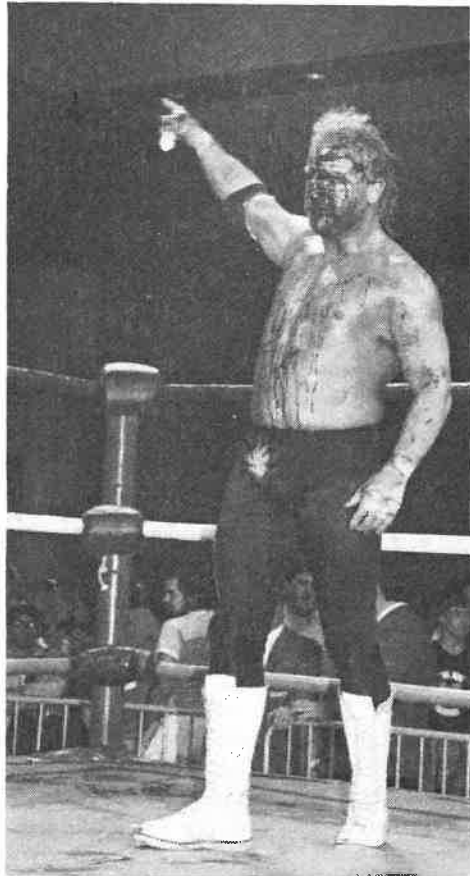
Keller: So who was it that got Paul E. involved?

Gilbert: It's unbelievable how all this has come out. Monday night I got to the matches and Lawler comes in and sits down with me and said, "Jerry Jarrett says he didn't mention Paul E.'s name or blame Paul for it." I said, "Well somebody did and I'd like to know who did. The

guy's sitting at home." Lawler was trying to be calm about it and I dropped it then.

Keller: So why did your feud with Lawler never culminate?

Gilbert: Well, I then go to Lawler, "Well, do you need me to be at TV Saturday or do you just want me to send in an interview." He says, "Why don't you just send an interview?" And I said, "When are you going to let me know what it's about?" He said, "During the week." Already I knew something was up and that it was probably Jerry Jarrett. That's where I have my real sore spot, with him. So as the week went on I called Lawler on Wednesday. I told Lawler, "Your first culprit in the whole thing is Jim Ross. He's the one that had it for public knowledge that you were going to challenge Luger for the title sometime." So Lawler goes, "Then they ought to fire Jim Ross." I said, "Do you know yet what you need me to do the interview on." He says, "Well, I'll call ya' tomorrow." I said, "Well, I got to know by tomorrow afternoon by 5:00. I'll go down to Channel 69 where Pedicino said I could do the interview. Plus Lawler wanted me to do three interviews for the Great Lakes Promotion in Ohio where we have matches coming up against each other." He said, "Okay." And that's the last I heard from Jerry Lawler. I didn't hear from him Thursday. That's how he does business. I asked that day on the phone, "With all this stuff going on, just tell me, does Jerry Jarrett want me?" He said, "I don't know, I haven't asked him about it."



Eddie Gilbert

Wade Keller

Then I actually came out and asked, "Well, am I booked Monday night?" He said, "Well, he hasn't booked the card yet." This was Wednesday and Jerry Jarrett always books early. So I didn't go to Nashville and won't make the rest of them either.

Keller: Initially, what did you say to Lawler? What did you know when you first brought up the situation to Lawler?

Gilbert: Just the TV taping. That's all I knew. I didn't know they were going to do it like a shoot.

Keller: So he thought the TV taping was a secret?

Gilbert: I guess. It makes you think Lawler was looking for something. I enjoy secrecy in my angles, too, and I've always done that and I learned that from them, so I don't know why he's worried about it spreading just because I knew about it.

Keller: Do you think Lawler was upset that you knew or was it a convenient excuse to back out of the WCW deal, whatever that deal might have been?

Gilbert: His ego plays a big part in everything. Everything. It's understandable. He doesn't want to blemish his image in Memphis. He's got his own TV show. Every day in the newspaper there's an ad for Don's Transmission Service in Memphis and his picture's in it. He's on billboards in Memphis. And he's built his reputation all these years as the king of wrestling. He sued Harley Race over it. I still think the main thing is Jarrett and he aren't going to do anything unless they have the power to decide everything about it.

Keller: Do you think that Jarrett or Lawler brought up Paul E.'s name or do you believe Herd brought Paul E. into it as a scapegoat or as a way to get rid of him?

Gilbert: This is only speculation, but I really believe if someone said "Eddie Gilbert was the one that told us," then Jim Herd might have blamed it on Paul. I think it all started with Jarrett saying, "Eddie Gilbert knows." Then whoever came up with the Paul E. thing from there is how he got tagged with it. The whole thing that kills me is, Jarrett called Herd that morning. Then Paul was called in that morning an hour later, there was never even a question about it, they just blamed him. They didn't even try to find out (if he was at fault).

Keller: How was Paul E. presented with his suspension from what you've heard?

Gilbert: This isn't exactly from him, either, but the story is he was called in and questioned actually about his friendship with me and ending his loyalty to me and that it would never end so they placed him on suspension because he supposedly told me about the angle. And a big argument erupted.

Keller: You easily could be in WCW now.

Bill Watts was great in the interview with you. He speaks his mind and that's where I learned a lot of my stuff. A lot of people say he's controversial and I'm controversial, but what I want to point out is that some of the greatest leaders in history have been controversial. Even though Watts would be a George Patton in a sense walking around and telling people like it is, he would straighten the place out, give it an overhaul, and they need it bad.

Why aren't you there now?

Gilbert: The three things that I wish Jack Petrik would look at is first, the Ric Flair situation. No matter whether I like him or not in an office or executive way, Flair's ability in the ring is unbelievable and his following was unbelievable. The number of people that were loyal to WCW because of Flair was unbelievable. You always had to take that into consideration when talking about either him dropping the belt or being misused. And then when all of this happened with him, I know how Herd feels about him and everybody else does, too, that Herd didn't want him around, and everybody knows Dusty didn't like him either. So it was a personal decision, it wasn't a good business decision. Now the WWF is having record advances and tremendous gates because they have Ric Flair. It's all the ego thing of WCW and Jim Herd saying they didn't need him and they could do it on their own. Well (laughs).

Then the thing that happened with me. I had a talk with them and I thought we had covered everything. I knew if I was to go back I would have to bend for them a lot. I knew I was going to be tested, and that was okay. Then Magnum called me and told me in two weeks I'd be starting and that at the "Clash" I would be working with Brian Pillman, and I thought, "Great." I was going in as a heel, and a heel is my kind of gimmick with the way I work matches, especially finishes. I mean, for a year in the UWF before I really started getting any kind of character or position, I was getting pinned every night, but as long as you know how to keep your heat, that's no problem. So I knew me and

Pillman would have a good match so I was looking forward to it. I knew I would have to put him over and that's fine. So then a week later Jim Ross calls me and we had a two hour conversation and ten or fifteen minutes of that conversation was him telling me that first I would be a babyface and from there on in I was numb. I knew what they were doing. They also told me that he had told Dusty that they were going to put me and Cactus on one of the Sunday "Main Event" shows together. This was three or four days before that two out of three falls deal in Philadelphia. So Ross is telling me he talked Dusty into putting me and Cactus on a Main Event show in a match. Well, I knew, too, going back there working first as a babyface, if they took me and Cactus, they'd put us on TV and tell us to stay in the ring and we would just have a solid, good match. It would ruin everything we had already done. I take too much pride in my work and I know they'd destroy it. Then he told me for the next hour and a half his ideas on running the company. So that was the lecture he had.

So that's why I made the decision not to go in and I think it's probably the best thing.

Keller: : Do you blame Cactus Jack for going to WCW?

Gilbert: No. No I don't. Money-wise it was a good move. And WCW was high on him. What really bothered me was instead of making a business decision after I had worked as a heel for a year and a half up to that point, they just wanted to bring me in to misuse me for whatever reason. It's not good business sense. Same with Flair. And most recently, the same with Paul.

Keller: We've talked about the hierarchy with Jim Herd and Jack Petrik. Is it beyond Herd's fault and now Petrik's for allowing Herd to continue running WCW without a steering wheel for so long? Who's to blame at this point?

Gilbert: That's a good loaded question (laughs). I tell ya' what. Maybe out of friendship, Petrik will wait until his contract is up, I don't know. If he doesn't do anything when his contract is up, we have to shift the blame to Jack Petrik then. But the one who has made all these decisions and caused all this stuff is Jim Herd. So it's the fault of both of them in a way.

Keller: What are WCW's different options? Obviously one option is Bill Watts. Would he fit in the corporate structure of WCW?

Gilbert: Okay, I want to say this about Bill Watts. He was great in the interview with you. He speaks his mind and that's where I learned a lot of my stuff. A lot of people say he's controversial and I'm controversial, but what I want to point out to everybody is that some of the greatest leaders in history have been controversial. General George Patton—who is one of my heroes in history—is one of those guys who opened his mouth and sometimes stuck his

foot into it, but he was one of the greatest leaders we've ever had. And whenever Dwight Eisenhower, who was over him, decided that he was going to take Germany, he didn't send his best friend. He picked George Patton, even though he was controversial and slapped the other soldier one time and all this, but he picked him. So if Jack Petrik is smart—and he obviously is or he wouldn't be in the position he is—but wrestling-smart, he would pick Bill Watts to run the company. Even though Bill Watts would be a George Patton in a sense walking around and telling people like it is, he would straighten the place out, give it an overhaul, and they need it bad. But what I touched on today is if they don't pick Bill Watts, whoever is next, they need to pick a wrestling person. Jimmy Crockett's back on the scene. Whatever the situation.

Keller: Do you think Jim Crockett or Jerry Jarrett would be qualified to replace Herd?

Gilbert: Jimmy Crockett is. I don't know about Jarrett. I don't know. He's been tremendously successful in Memphis, but I don't think he could handle a national company. No.

Keller: Do you think Jim Crockett would? Would Crockett fall into the same problem he ran into when Jim Crockett Promotions went bankrupt in relying upon his booker too heavily and too long?

Gilbert: What he does know is the wrestling business, how to run a company. He knows the business, but not booking. Jimmy knows that now. I've heard him say it and I've heard him say before and lately, especially after his latest attempt after Dusty left and he was interim booker until George Scott came in, he stated then, "I'm no booker." But he does know what cities need to be run and the wrestling business and the TV shows and how important they are. He takes a lot of pride in them. I'm not saying this to pin him as a savior, because he's not, but he is a wrestling man and that's what we need.

Keller: It is sort of the opposite of the dilemma, "If we fire Jim Herd, we still have to find someone to be able to replace him." The real question is, "If we fire Jim Herd, who could do a worse job?"

Gilbert: That's true. Herd is making decisions on things he doesn't know about. He listens to the wrong people, but that's been going on for three years.

Keller: We talk a lot about WCW, but right now your main involvement is Global. From looking at the GWF from the outside as you have for most of Global's existence up until this point, what do you think of their early direction and early progress?

Gilbert: I mean, they are on a tight budget. Their TV shows are being kept pretty fundamental, pretty basic. It's just like a baby growing up, you gotta just take care of it and watch it grow. I think it's too early to say what's going to happen.



Jerry Lawler

Jerry Wilson

Keller: Would you like to see them do some different things with TV and be a little daring with what they do?

Gilbert: You know I would. I'm not asked and I don't go to their TV meetings. I walked in there the other day and Joe Pedicino, Craig Johnson, and Bill Eadie are doing it. I've seen some of my ideas that I have just mentioned to a few people being used. I don't like them done that way when they're not done the right way. I don't know if you know what I'm saying, but I'm too much of a perfectionist. I think Joe's a little scared... kind of scared of me in a sense. Not in a bad way. He doesn't call me that much. He doesn't know if I... my temper, you know, is about to act up. I'm actually okay, he just doesn't know (laughs). They're going to be all right, but who knows the future.

Keller: A lot of people might be hard on Joe because Joe talked so big at the beginning and now it's just a regional TV promotion with not a ton of top talent.

Gilbert: Before 1987 when I first started booking, it's really easy for everybody to sit around and come up with ideas. But I think Joe's always had ideas. Craig Johnson is putting ideas in. I don't think they ought to be doing ideas that make them feel good, that they get excited about. I think they ought to be thinking about the people and what they accept and what they want to see, if that makes sense to you. Just because they sit here and say, "Oh boy! This'll work! We'll do this Boss thing and we won't tell anybody." I just hope after such a big build-up for the Boss that the people do find out, I hope they are excited, but I have this feeling they're not going to be. I think it's going to be a letdown to everybody.

TOD GORDON

Tod Gordon, 38, a jewelry store owner, father of four, and lifetime wrestling fan got into promoting on his own two years ago. He formed Eastern Championship Wrestling, which at first was just another independent promotion that ran a show here and there in front of a few hundred fans. Today, Gordon and booker Paul E. Dangerously are heading up a successful part-time regional promotion, which seems to have a growing base of hardcore fans in Philadelphia and growing momentum.

The ECW television show, now seen on SportsChannel Philadelphia and soon in other markets, is cutting edge, unafraid to take chances, and always unpredictable. Thanks to its innovative television product and a great mix of talent including Terry Funk, Sabu, Shane Douglas, and Kevin Sullivan, Gordon is beginning to make decent money off of ECW. Gordon admits he would consider switching his full-time alliance from his three-generation family jewelry store to promoting a full-time territory if he believed he could still feed his family—an option he didn't even laughingly consider a few months ago.

If there is an answer out there to today's wrestling recession, it will not be found by doing more of the same. Promotions like ECW are

breaking the paradigms of U.S. wrestling that have driven pro wrestling to some of its lowest depths in history.

In this "Torch Talk" interview conducted January 4 via phone from Gordon's home in Philadelphia, Gordon takes us step by step through a day as a promoter, specifically looking at Dec. 26th's "Holiday Hell" and explains his still developing promoting philosophy.

Wade Keller: I want to start with some discussion on your most recent house show, "Holiday Hell" in Philadelphia on Dec. 26. Walk through the process for you as a promoter that night for what is one of your bigger events.

Tod Gordon: Okay. I walk to the arena around one in the afternoon. My production company was probably there from 11:30 on. They had to get the lighting started because we hung a lot of lights that night. We were filming for video tape. I ran through all of the check points. You go to the dressing room area first, make sure everything's set up the way it's supposed to be. We also have a ring back there, a large area back there, make sure it's all cleaned out. Make sure the chairs we ordered for the arena have arrived. I checked on the concession stands and tickets and the ring arriving on time. In this case, I had to make sure the extra cage arrived and the pyrotechnics. You have to make sure the out of town workers are being picked up, make sure their flights are on time. Of course, that's handled by Paul (E. Dangerously). But you cross-check back and forth. Each guy then arrives one at a time, so I sit down and go over what's going on. You get ready to start the show.

Keller: Once the show begins, does it run itself, or is there still a bunch of work to do?

Gordon: Once the show begins, I usually talk with different guys about their match and what's going on, making sure they understand the angle that is laid out for them. I go through the arena and make sure everybody is where they are supposed to be. Make sure the tickets are coming in, the people are still coming in the door. During the night of the show, I see maybe two matches if I'm lucky. Generally, I'm back and forth, back and forth, in and out. Last minute changes, scurrying about, putting our heads together, banging out an idea, something like that.

Keller: Give me an example of something on "Holiday Hell" that didn't go smoothly that you had to deal with.

Gordon: The big thing that happened at the last show was the exploding cage match where we had Johnny Grunge and Paul Diamond handcuffed to a cage up on the stage. At the fifteen minute mark of the match between Pat Tanaka and Flyboy Rocco Rock, the cages were to explode. They were set up with explosives and lined up to a whole bowl of gunpowder that was sitting at the bottom of the cage.

Then, as a last minute idea, I thought it would be good for the security guards and the cops who

were working the arena to take Johnny Grunge if he wouldn't go into the cage on his own, and take him to the cage and throw him in there, which they did. But they had to climb up the stage to get him there and in doing so, one of the cops, not knowing anything about the match or what he was doing there other than he was supposed to throw a guy into a cage, stepped on the bowl of gunpowder and shot it completely across the floor. He destroyed what could have been a very nice explosion and turned it into nothing more than a pretty large flame.

Unfortunately, that marred what otherwise I think would have been a very good evening. I was very happy to see the number of people who showed up on a Sunday night. We had never run a Sunday night show before. Sunday night in Philadelphia is not exactly a big night for anything. For some reason this area rolls up their curbs Sunday at six.

Keller: During the show on the 26th, or on any night for that matter, what kind of interaction do you have with the wrestlers? Is it usually hurried and negative and trying, or is it usually pretty smooth?

Gordon: Actually, it's really enjoyable. I've really developed—not having spoken to that many different promotions, I can't tell you if this is par for the course or unusual, but I've developed a lot of friendships with a lot of the guys. So we only get to see someone after the show. So it's like catching up, asking about the family, how they've been. I know a lot of their families. I've taken an interest in a lot of the guys. As I've said, I've developed some really nice relationships there. It's really good, especially with some of the fly-ins. The local boys, like Johnny Hotbody or Sandman, people like that who I'm friendly with, when they stop in the store, I see them pretty often. I don't get to see Sal Bellomo or Terry Funk or Kevin Sullivan, people like that, I don't get to see that often. So when I get to see them at a show, it's great to spend some time together.

Keller: What's a typical problem—not that it's anybody's fault in particular—but that a miscommunication takes place with a wrestler where you have to work something out with them?

Gordon: This is going to sound a little bizarre, but we rarely have those kinds of things happen. Something like when the lights went out at "November to Remember," we had a power failure. Just like that, that quickly, Paul with his creativity started sending out wrestler after wrestler while the lights are out. Next thing you know, we have 30 people in the ring with chairs killing each other and when the lights came back on, the place went crazy. We had an idea for a match from that, a lights out battle royal on that card which set up a lights out battle royal for our "Holiday Hell" show. That kind of thing, if that's a problem, all of our problems should be so horrible.



Tod Gordon

Mike Lano

I tell you this sincerely, I can't tell you how many people have flown in from other areas who have said to us how much they enjoy working because of our locker room area. In our locker room, nobody's uptight, nobody's tense, nobody's running around frantically pulling their hair out. They're exchanging ideas, talking with old friends. It's terrific back there. There's such a feeling of camaraderie as opposed to competition. It's very, very unusual from what I understand in this industry. If I hadn't heard it from so many people, and that goes from Jim Neidhart to Hawk, people who have been in a lot of different locker rooms in the country. They say they like coming here because it's fun.

Keller: What kind of rules do you have in terms of the time wrestlers should show up or locker room conduct or instructions to wrestlers in terms of how they conduct themselves in the ring?

Gordon: Everybody's there two hours before the show. They have to be in the locker room by 5:30 for a 7:30 show. We open the doors between 6:00 and 6:30. I want all the wrestlers in the building before the doors are open. That's a rule. Basically, backstage, there's no rules because there's never a problem.

Keller: Do you have alcohol in the back?

Gordon: No, never. If somebody had a beer back there, would I say anything to them? No. We don't bring it in, so if it's up to them to bring it in on their own, odds are you're not going to see it. They'll wait until afterward for the wrestlers to buy it for them. There's no alcohol in the back, but that's not because it's a rule, it just doesn't work out that way. But there's no horseplay. There's nobody throwing cans at each other, jumping on each other's back. It's not wild or out of control. It's really almost like a party atmosphere, like a cocktail party.

Keller: During "Holiday Hell," what efforts did you make before, and more so during and after the matches, to read what the fans thought of the product you were offering them?

Gordon: Well, beforehand, I was happy because the advance was larger than the advance for the show before that. The show before that had been our attendance record-setter at 1,492. For that, I think we only had about 200 tickets sold in advance. We had almost 1,200 or 1,300 people walk up to the door. It was raining that night, too. It was horrible. This show, it was freezing cold, must have been minus ten degrees to the wind chill factor. Our advance was more like 350, 400 sold. That's double. I was excited about the possibilities. When I got there at 1:30, it was freezing, by 3:30, we're getting colder and there was already a line outside. Wow. These people like what we're doing. Anybody who's gonna show up at 3:30 in this cold, they must really like what we're doing. I brought some of the people in the back door in a holding area. I

couldn't let them stand outside for three hours. It was too cold. That touches me that anybody likes our stuff that much that they'd wait hours outside in line. I don't know if that happens with other promotions, but that kind of thing impresses me.

Keller: Do you have your reaction for fan reaction to angles and matches? Are you conscious of that or too busy to pay close attention?

Gordon: It's hard to be surprised by anything with these fans, because I know every heel is going to get cheered and every babyface is going to get booed, but we did one angle where Sandman ran in and saved a jobber who was getting killed by a kid by the name of Pitbull Gary. He made the save and the entire audience started yelling "Sandman sucks." This is one of our babyfaces here who's been around forever. He's got a female valet who they all love. He came out and they wanted to see this guy keep beating the jobber up. Sometimes, I say to myself, wow, even I didn't think they were that vicious. It's a different kind of town. You can't book Philadelphia the way you book the rest of the country. It just can't be done.

Keller: After the card is over, do you seek out fan response?

Gordon: Yeah. They actually wait. When we come out of the dressing area, which could be an hour after the show is over by the time I'm done paying everybody, going through each person's stuff with them, telling them when and if we're coming back, if they're coming back, and shooting interviews, we'll come out and there'll still be 75, 80 people in the building waiting outside the dressing room doors telling us how great the show was, how much they loved it. How they were so thrilled to have a product that they feel is their own. ECW is like their hometown team. They see it as Philadelphia wrestling. It's incredible.

Keller: As incredible as it is and as unpredictable as they are, would you rather have the fans be a little more traditional so you could look around the country for ideas and be able to apply them verbatim rather than having to always break tradition so much?

Gordon: Absolutely, although I will tell you that being forced to break with tradition lends itself to creativity. It's very easy to say, "Okay, here's the angle that's been done 500 times before." But if I say, "Hey, we can't do that here. Paul, let's come up with something." He's got to come up with an angle they won't say they've seen 500 times. He'll take that very same angle and throw a little Oliver Twist on it and make people—anything they expect to happen is the last thing we're going to give them. That's the philosophy of ECW. The fans have been so conditioned. There's only eight finishes, you know. They're so conditioned to that, anything else is like they're mesmerized by it. And there's a million things out there that can be done.

Sometimes, I say to myself, wow, even I didn't think they (the ECW Arena fans) were that vicious. It's a different kind of town. You can't book Philadelphia the way you book the rest of the country. It just can't be done.

Keller: How do your fans approach wrestling compared to other areas, not in terms of whom they cheer and boo, but in terms of what they're there for and what they want from wrestling?

Gordon: My attitude is we charge more—at our house shows, we charge \$25 and \$12. That's maybe \$10 more than the highest WWF seats. WCW doesn't count anymore because they don't come to Philadelphia. That's more than they ever charged, and yet we'll sell out the front three rows at \$25. So that tells me they want to see something they can't see anywhere else. That doesn't mean they just want to see somebody bleed. I mean, anybody can bleed. This is showing them the type of unbridled violence so that they really feel like they've let a lot out of their system. When they leave as a fan at the end of the night, they're emotionally and physically spent. That's gotta be a good feeling, it's gotta make you want to comeback.

Keller: You've achieved a level of success in your area with four-figure crowds. Where do you want to go from here?

Gordon: Well, one of my referees was just laid off. He lives in New Jersey. He's literally lining up two or three shows in the next few months in Jersey. So we're going to start to go there. Our TV goes all the way down to the Jersey shore. There is a new network that opened up in Trenton, a UHF station that has been picked up on the northern Jersey cable systems. I believe we should be on that station in four to five weeks. Also, this Saturday I have a meeting with somebody from Florida who is flying in for our TV on Friday. According to him, he thinks he can place us in anywhere from seven to twelve markets. If that's the case, and I'm hoping that is the case, then I'd like to immediately start expanding to other states. I can do that one of two ways. Just by licensing myself in other states or in dealing with promoters in other states who I've developed relationships with. I can give them a percentage for handling the building and all the work ahead of time.

We did Maryland. We're ready to do Jersey now. I'd like to do a big show in Delaware sometime in the next few months, too, if I can because I think Delaware is a wide open state.

Keller: Are you going to have to adjust your formula in any way where you're still satisfying fans in Philadelphia, but not do things to an extreme that might rub people wrong in other areas?

Gordon: We did a show in Maryland and it was my time in Maryland. I walk in there and the first person I meet, of course, is the head of the State Athletic Commission who informs me, and I quote, "Ya' bleed, I stop the show. Ya' go into the crowd, I stop the show. You curse from the ring, I stop the show. You spit into the audience, I stop the show." I said, "This guy must have been watching our stuff. That doesn't leave anything left, does it? He didn't mention nudity, so I guess he didn't see all of our shows."

But that certainly changed our product. By the same token, it's good for the guys to have to keep in the ring sometimes because sometimes it's easy to get in the habit of spending your entire match chairshotting each other. While we have guys who don't do that, there are a lot of guys who sometimes fall into that habit. It's good to keep in the ring once in a while. Nonetheless, it certainly does curtail a lot of the stuff we do. When people see the ECW, the first thing they think of is somebody getting their head smashed with a chair. It's like the first visual image you usually come to. It's hard to be wild and different when you have those kinds of restrictions on you. Fortunately, that's only Maryland and it doesn't apply in other states.

Keller: Do you think the ECW formula that's working in Philadelphia to the degree that it is will work to a similar degree in New Jersey?

Gordon: I genuinely believe in my heart of hearts that the Philadelphia fan exists all over the world. They're not just here. There are our kind of fans everywhere. Hey, if we can draw a thousand, two thousand people everywhere we run, we'd make money. If it grows from there, that's fine too. Once we get the television show on in other markets, that's going to be a big boon for us because this MTV style wrestling, while it may not be my personal cup of tea, is definitely appealing to a group of people who probably had turned off wrestling. They're young and the first thing they saw was Hulk Hogan's WWF and after a year or two, they got bored with that and weren't into wrestling. So what this is doing, it's appealing to those people and showing them. They're watching.

At the same time, it's appealing to the people who stopped watching who are older, who grew up like when I grew up and watched Bruno Sammartino and Killer Kowalski or Spiros Arion in 60 minute cage matches. It had meaning, it had storylines to them. We're appealing to those people, too, because we're coming back to that. Shane Douglas, I wanna tell you something, this guy is a homerun. He is awesome. There is no question he can go all the way. He's got it all. He can wrestle for 60 minutes. He can do everything that needs to be done, but by the same token, he can get you more crowd heat than anybody.

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Terry Funk is another great name. There's nothing he doesn't know about this business. You asked about our dressing room. One thing about Paul (E. Dangerously). He is smart enough to know that he doesn't know everything. And he won't hesitate to announce before every show when he gets the boys together, "Hey, Terry Funk's in the dressing room, Kevin Sullivan's in the dressing room, Jimmy Snuka's in the dressing room. If you have a question about anything about any of your matches, go ask them, learn from the masters."

And you know what, those three guys will spend an hour talking to anybody, whether they know them or not. They'll go over the psychology of a match. That's one thing the kids today, the younger guys, just don't know—psychology. They can bump from here to Mars by they have no clue about the psychology of a match. It's pathetic.

Wade Keller: What is it you like and don't like about the MTV-style of your ECW television?

Tod Gordon: I love the characters (Paul E. Dangerously) created. I love Matty in the House. He reminds me of me when I was in college. My hair wasn't quite that long, but it was almost that long. He just reminds me of everybody I hung out with back then. If it were ten years ago, I would probably be hanging out with Matty right now.

Jason, that character is phenomenal. It's amazing. When I first saw it, I said, "That'll never get over!" I was wrong. The first time I saw Matty, I wasn't sure I was going to like the character. It's been phenomenal. My kids walk around the house imitating Matty in the House. I'm not kidding. My daughter turns her hat backwards and pulls her hair to the side of her face. She looks like Matty and goes around the house talking like him. When she's not doing him, she's doing Jason.

The show's been on for ten months, and she loved Eddie Gilbert and a lot of his characters, but she never did them. But they automatically just started doing Jason and Matty. That tells me something. Here's my daughter walking around

all day long asking how we like her suit. I love the excitement of that.

I also love the fact that I think it's the fastest 60 minutes on television. When I sit down and watch my own show—and I watch it like a fan would, I can't believe it's over.

What don't I like? I don't know. I'm not a fan of rap music. The songs we use on the show are not my kind of music, but I know it's working because the crowds are getting bigger. That's not my kind of music. I'm back in the '70s with old-time rock. The newer stuff—I guess I stopped at a certain point. That kind of stuff I don't like, but that's okay, I can get past it because what's going on when they play that music is just highspot after highspot.

Keller: How did you react to the problem with the gunpowder spilling at "Holiday Hell" when you went on television and said, "Ladies and gentleman, this is the ECW and you can count on us to deliver what we promise." You cited an unmasking and the infamous stripping of a woman's top as examples of ECW delivering on match stipulations. How do you save face, even though what went wrong wasn't a result of screw-job booking?

Gordon: I was majorly depressed. When that happened, I walked straight to the back. It was me at ringside doing the "9-8-7..." countdown. It was me doing the call. I was devastated. I realize you can't bat a thousand, but the fans were undoubtedly and rightfully upset. I had no comeback. I realize there was no one to blame for it, yet I still couldn't accept that it happened. It just shouldn't have happened. All I kept saying to people who needed it told to was, "This shouldn't have happened." And it could have been avoided. I'm not going to cast any anger or blame at this point, because it wouldn't do any good. All I have to do is come back and do better next time and give them a better show next time. The match up until that point was a great match. Funk-Sabu, if I'm rating it, is four-and-a-half stars. I mean, the show itself was still a terrific show. Unfortunately, everybody walked away remembering that. Then again, if they're watching TV, they're reminded of the good from the show. They're realizing, even if I did mess up, we'll make it up. We'll keep giving them consistently a good product. Maybe it's time to low-key the gimmick matches and just get back to the hardcore, just let it hang out, wrestling style.

Keller: How is your approach to a show like the Dec. 26 "Holiday Hell" house show different from this Friday's television taping?

Gordon: For one thing, you can't use blood on TV tapings, unless it's a dark match. In fact, we just released a tape of our bloodiest matches that we taped at TV tapings but we never showed on TV. The two Gilbert brothers vs. Miguel Perez & Crash the Terminator, for instance. Sullivan vs. Abby in the cage was another.

TV tapings are much more anxious than house

shows. It's very important that an angle be done properly. If we're taping three weeks of shows on one night, it's important the younger guys understand it's a three-week angle, not a one-shot deal. There's a lot more to worry about at a TV taping, with lighting, cameras, the guy in the truck catching the right shots, is the crowd control being handled properly.

When I first started this, my initial concept was to do a TV taping once a week live. This was before there was a Monday Night Raw. That was the concept, to do what Jerry Lawler was doing down in Memphis, but on a little bit larger scale and make the show a little bit more like the TBS show of the '80s with the Four Horsemen in their heyday. That was the most entertaining wrestling TV I used to watch. I was trying to do something that was a cross between that and that live kind of feel every Saturday. Somehow, from there, we ended up where we are now, which is 3,000 degrees in the other direction. I'm thrilled we ended up where we are.

Keller: A lot of people advocate live television for all of the reasons that you probably wanted to go in that direction initially. What are the realities of promoting for the situation you're in and generally speaking that prohibit promoters from doing what so many fans find to be the most exciting concept—which is live TV every week?

Gordon: For one, you have to find a station that is willing to carry it live.

Keller: Why wouldn't a station want a live broadcast?

Gordon: It's more costly to the station. See, now, we're handing them a video tape, a master tape that we put together. Here, they would have to be picking up the signal directly from the arena. That would involve them doing some work, too. They're not really apt to do that unless they're making a lot of money and I don't know how much money the station is making off of our show, but I know we're giving them a fresh program every week.

Keller: Is there any way to incorporate live television in some way with what you're doing or don't you see that as a plus at this point?

Gordon: I don't think you can today because post-production has become so important. You really need that little bit of time back in the studio to fill in between your bumpers and stress certain points that are more important than others. I never realized how important post-production was. I used to hate the idea of having a voice over. Now, I realize how necessary that actually is.

Keller: When you look down the line, do you want this to be full-time for a core group of 12 to 24 wrestlers who rely on ECW to make a living? Is that what you're striving for, one way or another?

Gordon: I never would have believed I'm going to say to you what I'm going to say to you

now six months ago, but yes I can see this actually becoming my vocation.

Keller: For you or the wrestlers?

Gordon: If it's full-time for me, it becomes full-time for them. If I'm doing this seven days a week, it's because we have something that's going to make money for everybody. I never would have expected that to be a possibility, but now I can see it as at least a possibility.

Keller: What has changed so you think of that as a possibility, and secondly, what stands in your way of making that happen?

Gordon: I think nothing is standing in the way because I'm trying to make moves in that direction. If somebody came up to me six or eight months ago and said, "How would you like to see your show in Detroit?" I would say, "Well, what for?" Now I say, "Gee, what station will we be on? Maybe there's a possibility of running shows there." That's not something I would have thought of before. I'm talking to someone about overseas tours. A lot of it has come to us. I got a call from somebody in Germany who had read about us and sent for a tape and saw UltraClash and went berserk and wants us on TV in Germany and wants us to do a tour of Germany. They came to us, we didn't go to them. It's scary how I can sit in my office during the course of the week and the calls that come in and where they're coming from. Everybody seems to be excited about the fact that we're not old school and we're not playing by the old rules. We're just sort of saying, we know it's good, we know what the people seem to like, so we're going to do that. If it's not the way it's always been done, that's okay, too. You don't have to do the same thing over and over and over.

Keller: What are the steps that you need to take to make this a full-time venture for you?

Gordon: Realistically, what I need to do is spend eight or nine hours a day working on the wrestling business instead of eight hours a day working on my own business while spending two hours or more of it on the phone doing wrestling and then doing it when I come home. What I really need is to put that kind of time into it. What I'm trying to do in the meantime is group enough people together and give them enough direction to do a lot of what I would be doing in that eight hours. If I get enough people working in that direction, I sincerely believe I can get to that point and then make that decision afterwards, as opposed to making the decision and finding out the hard way it was the wrong decision.

I'm not easily willing to give up something that's been in my family for three generations. I'm not willing to give up the one thing that I know puts food on my table and clothes on my kids' backs.

Keller: Is there any way to continue your jewelry store business without you being full time?

Gordon: I guess it could be done, but like any business, absentee ownership is the kiss of death. I'm a very hands-on owner and I'm able to delegate. I just need to be there to make sure everybody knows I'm there.

Keller: How would your family feel if you were to enter pro wrestling full-time?

Gordon: I think they trust me enough to know I wouldn't take the risk unless I didn't think it was a big risk. I wouldn't take the jump until I saw that risk really reduced greatly.

Keller: Talk about why you hired Paul E. Dangerously as your booker and how he has surprised you since then.

Gordon: I first met Paul through Eddie Gilbert. And he brought him down as his "best friend in the whole world." I was very wary of Paul because he came on strong and he didn't know me. I thought, geez, this guy is going to be, "What you see is what you get." I can still remember Eddie saying, "That guy you see on TV, that's really Paul." Except that really wasn't true. When I got to meet him, the first night I met him, which I'll never forget, was a TV taping at Cabrini College, one of our first TV tapings. We went back to the hotel room. It was me, him, and Eddie. We started talking about something and I said, "Geez, I wouldn't want to make that kind of decision because I don't know enough about the business to make it. Really, you guys would know more than I would." Paul turned to Eddie and said, "I like this guy. Let's keep him." He then said, "I'm serious. I've worked for a hundred promoters and very few of them would say, 'Hey, you know more than I do. I trust your judgment.' Since you're saying it from day one, I like you, we'll keep you."

Slowly, but surely, as I got to see him more and more, I saw that he was a really bright, bright guy. He wasn't just a brash, wild-eyed whatever. He actually had a lot of thought process behind what he was doing. I never considered him a booker. I was very happy with the situation that I had (with Eddie Gilbert). I knew that he was supposedly going to do booking down the road for a promotion that Jim Crockett was going to start. At this time, it was like seven months away, but I never thought of him for myself. When I ran into some problems back and forth with Eddie, having gotten to know (Paul) a little bit and having gotten a little bit friendly with him, I asked him if he would help me out with one show, the one we were very close to, UltraClash. I needed help running the dressing room.

It was a very tough night for Paul because, for one thing, Jimmy Crockett was there, his soon to be boss or future boss. He also had the situation with Eddie being outside of the arena and his brother being backstage. He was put into a hell of a situation. I thought I was going to find out really fast if this guy had the potential to be someone I'd want to hitch my wagon to. There was a lot of stress that night. He really came through like a champ. Every time something



Shane Douglas

Wade Keller

stressful would come up, he would ask me what was the matter. I would tell him I had a problem. He'd ask what the problem was. I'd tell him. He'd say, "Forget it, it's done. What's the next problem." I said, "What do you mean!" He said, "I'll take care of it." Everything that came up, he said, "I'll take care of it." I thought, "What is the guy, on drugs?" But he took care of it. I mean, he managed to get it done. I even said, "Paul, let's not make any kind of commitment. Let's try for another show." I couldn't believe it myself. He has done nothing—and this is the truth, I don't have to blow smoke up anyone's rear end, I just don't have to do it—he has done nothing but impress me from the first day he has worked here." He is a professional, bright, he knows how to deal with the boys, he knows how to deal with the bosses.

I was expecting this hotheaded guy who had thrown a chair at (his boss at the time) Ric Flair, told off "Cowboy" Bill Watts, and had told every promoter in the world to kiss their butt. I'm remembering the interview he did for you in that big Annual. You asked him about being sleazy and he said, "What do you think I am, a promoter?" That's what I was expecting to get. Instead I got his bizarro world twin brother, this other person who is a businessman. I mean, this guy has been all business since the day he got here. I think this is the real Paul E. who has matured, who realizes the stuff he did before was more show than blow. He realizes if anybody is going to take him seriously, he has to act like a responsible adult.

Keller: Do you still feel sometimes that he's working you, with or without bad intentions?

Gordon: I think he's a lot straighter than people give him credit for. People who I'm friendly with

in the business have said, "Awe, Paul, he's a bullsh--er. Because I'm clever enough myself in an ownership position to put people in positions to test them without them knowing that's what's going on and he's come through with flying colors every time. Does he make me crazy sometimes? Sure. When he's driving to the arena putting the matches together in the car on a little piece of scrap paper three inches by three inches. I'm the kind of person who likes to have everything written out with 18 copies six weeks ahead of time. That makes me crazy. Then all I see is a great show. It's amazing to me. He can do more in five minutes than some can do in a day.

Wade Keller: You've worked with both Eddie Gilbert and Paul E. Dangerously, who have been seen for a couple of years by some as future stars in the creative end of this business. How are they different and how are they similar?

Tod Gordon: They are as different as night and day. I can't even tell you what's similar about them. I would be more hard-pressed to find a similarity between the two of them than a difference. What's similar about them? They both respect the business. They have a tremendous amount of respect for the people who—well, let's use Terry Funk as an example. They both don't see Terry Funk as a worker. They see him as more than that. They see him as somebody who should be treated with a certain amount of respect and reverence because of what he's done and what he's accomplished.

They both came from two completely different vantage points. Eddie grew up in a wrestling family. Paul had nothing to do with it. He was a photographer. He was a snot-nosed kid running around the backs of arenas. But they both were around the business since they were babies and they both learned to respect the right kinds of people. There are certain people—say, for instance, Sid Vicious—neither of these two guys, even if they thought Sid Vicious could draw a \$100,000 house, would touch him because they respect the business. Now, I'm telling you if I told Paul, "We could draw a \$100,000 house with this guy!" he would say, "I'm not booking him. You want to book him, that one show will be yours, but I'm not booking him." I respect that.

Keller: On a day-to-day and show-for-show basis, how did the two differ in their approach to booking ECW?

Gordon: Eddie was not a sharer in terms of what he was doing. Eddie's way of handling it was to come up to a couple of days before the show, show me everything completely laid out from the opening montage to the final precut right to the show laid out for three weeks' worth of television. Paul will call me fourteen times a day saying, "What do you think of this?" He actually cares about my input. I've been a major league, intense fan for a long time, so I've got some ideas that I can offer that might be very viable in terms

of helping him. He respects that and likes to bounce things back and forth. When we do that, we'll fine tune that. It doesn't matter whose idea it was. I'll take you again to my eight year old daughter—she seems to be the one who has been bitten by the bug here. She had an idea that I told to Paul that at the end of a show one night we should have the insignia for SportsChannel on the air and have Jason bust his head through the insignia and say, "Wait, don't end the show yet! How do you like my suit?" When I told that to Paul, he went ballistic. He said, "That's phenomenal, let's do it." He didn't care where it came from. If it's good, he'll do it. How many bookers are like that? Most bookers want it their way and don't want to hear from anybody else because they'll feel threatened. He doesn't feel threatened. He's very secure in who he is and that's why I feel secure working with him.

The insecurity of people in this business is just so annoying it makes it impossible to have a decent relationship. Most of the people in this business are so paranoid, it's incredible. But this guy's not. Some people think everybody's coming after their job, everybody's coming after them. Paul E. couldn't care less. He says, "They want my job? Let them come after it. I'm good. If he's better, then say goodbye to me." I respect that. I like that he's secure in what he's doing. He doesn't feel the need to knock somebody else to make himself look better. He doesn't do that.

Keller: What about Gilbert vs. Dangerously in terms of the product they offered?

Gordon: Eddie gave me what I really liked at the beginning which was that Memphis style, you know, with everybody coming out with trash cans brawling all over the place. That really hardcore style. I love that. That was the kind of stuff I liked as a fan and Philadelphia fans like. I asked myself where do I go from here? You can't be like Memphis where every week the same guys are coming out like the Moondogs and hitting each other with trash cans. You can only do that so many times. Our people are a little bit more sophisticated up here, so they're ready for the next thing now. I don't know that there would have been a next thing (with Gilbert). Paul can always come up with the "next thing." I always say, "Damn, there's an idea. I wouldn't have thought of that."

Keller: Do you believe Gilbert could have delivered different styles, but was delivering what he believed would be most successful or was delivering what he thought you wanted? Or do you think Gilbert has one style that wouldn't last long?

Gordon: I think that what he does, he does very, very well. He can lay out television masterfully. He can make it minute by minute. He is very sophisticated that way. But, yes, I think what he's capable of at least as far as I was able to tell was what he was raised on seeing, that Memphis hardcore kick-butt style, but I don't

know where it would have gone from there. I can't say for sure it wouldn't have gone anywhere else, but my instincts told me that was where we were going to stay for a while. I didn't have a problem with that at the time, but we've grown into something else.

Keller: A lot of people look at Paul E. and ask why you would put him in charge of booking. After all, he's relatively young in this business and he's never wrestled. Does Dangerously have an advantage not being a veteran wrestler?

Gordon: Paul can step out and do the interview for every babyface and every heel in the dressing room. Paul studies wrestling. Paul will get up and do (Terry) Funk's interview, and then he'll do Shane (Douglas's) back. Maybe not those two specifically. But maybe a Sandman. He can do their whole interview and do it so well because he understands the character he is creating. He understands the philosophy of the character. He understands what the character needs to do. He will turn to Terry Funk or Kevin (Sullivan) or Shane and say, "Help me with these finishes. Here's what I want to get accomplished. I need a pin. How would you get there?" Instead of saying, "Here, do it this way." I think the guys in the locker room, even the veterans, respect him for caring enough.

Eddie was the same that way. He was big on giving the guys a lot of room, whether it was Stan Hansen or Don Muraco, whomever, he would give them a lot of leeway. I think the guys liked that a lot, too. He had a lot of problems getting along with the guys locally, but not so much the guys who were the "superstars." Paul, on the other hand, gets along with everybody.

Keller: In the areas of Dangerously's responsibilities as booker, where is he strongest and where is he weakest?

Gordon: Paul's only weak point that I see is that he lives on the edge. I mean, that whole idea of doing things at the last second amazes me. I figure it's got to catch up with ya' some day. So far he's defying the odds. It has not caught up with him. He can put something together just that quickly. I've seen him walk into the arena and ask, "Who else is here?" Then he comes up with something that seems like it took a month of planning to come up with. When I was booking myself, having booked for about year, I would plan months in advance. I really spent time fine-tuning it. I always tell Paul, "If you did this a week ahead of time, you could fine-tune it." Then again, who am I to say that to Paul when he is coming up with some of the most exciting live and televised product that I've seen in years. I'm not saying this because it's mine and I'm not saying it because it's Paul. From a pure fan point of view, I find our product as entertaining as anything I see anywhere in the country.

I think somebody's got to pick us up nationally soon because I just think if they did, they would

end up getting boffo ratings.

Keller: A lot of people are going to be asking as they read this: Paul E. is with you, Paul E. is with Crockett. Crockett is talking about going national. You seemed content to be regional up until recently. Does this create a conflict between you and Crockett and where does Paul E. stand?

Gordon: I knew we were going to get around to this (laughs). Let me tell you this as best I can tell you. At one point, when I did not think we were going to get much larger than we were, when I first sat with Jimmy (Crockett), I saw myself becoming a subsidiary of what he himself was trying to do. As I grew on my own, I started to think, "Well, gee, we've got something here that I think by itself can stand alone. And yet, I know how much he can offer from his vast wealth of experience in this business, not to mention having been through the "wars" which I assume at one point I will have to go through as I grow. I imagine eventually as I grow some of these people are going to say, "You're getting too big. I'm going to have to do something about that." Maybe not, but the point is he's been there. You've gotta respect anybody, whether it's Terry Funk or Jim Crockett, who has the experience.

I don't know where he and I are headed. Whatever it's going to be, I think it's going to be amicable and I think Paul's going to be the link there. I think we can work together.

Keller: By doing two separate promotions? Are you insistent on running your own promotion, or might you be a part of something Crockett starts up?

Gordon: You're asking me about a negotiation that's so hot right now, you're right in the middle of it. In a short time, I will probably be able to answer this a lot more concretely. I'm either going to do it with Jimmy or I'm going to do it on my own. But, I'm going to do it. That's my goal. Even if I do it separately from him, though, I will not be at war with him. That will not happen. Because if Paul were to say to me tomorrow, "Tod, I'm going to leave you"—which I don't think he'd do because we've really become close—"and I'm going to Jimmy Crockett and I'm taking these five guys with us."—I'd say, "Fine, hey, go get 'em." I would go on doing what we're doing. It would be different than what Paul is doing, but it would still be great. I would still keep going with it.

Keller: Even though every employee wants to feel valuable, every employer doesn't want any one employee having too much power or leverage over them. That being said, how reliant are you on Paul E. to put out the product that you are so proud of?

Gordon: Right now, I could not put on the television product I'm putting on without Paul E. But I could put on the wrestling. Yes, he's great. I think I would do a damn good job, though. I don't think I could do the television the way he does it. I think if he were to leave or I were to part

company with him, our television show would look very different. It would still be hardcore, but it would be a different kind of show.

Keller: Why would it be different?—

Gordon: I don't have access to the companies that he does in terms of getting videos. Quite honestly, I'm not as with it as he is. Being a former hippy, it's hard for me to say I'm not hip. I guess I don't have my finger on the pulse as he does today with what's going on with 17 to 28 year olds. I don't watch "Beavis and Butt-Head," but I'll still watch the Beverly Hillbillies. I'm missing that part of it.

I don't know that I need to worry about that. Paul has basically committed to both of us at this point. What he is trying to do at this point personally is to try to make it happen for all of us together. If it can't happen that way, I guarantee it will be amicable and friendly. Eddie and I split under very uncomfortable terms and he and I never went to war. He did a nasty interview in John Clark's newsletter, but I never responded to it. In this case, I don't think that would be the case. Whatever happens, we would stay friends. We have a lot more in common in our backgrounds that makes that possible.

Keller: Do you know Jim Crockett well?

Gordon: Paul E. is the middle-man. I speak with Jimmy occasionally, although we have not sat down and negotiated anything at this point because there is really nothing to negotiate right now. He's not bringing anything to the table right now. I think within a few months, too, I may be able to bring a whole lot more to the table. If this show starts going to other markets, I'll be sitting at the table with a lot—certainly a lot more than when we first met. It's just a matter of waiting and seeing. Personally, I like Jimmy. I think he is a very nice guy and I don't see any animosity developing between us. I haven't developed a friendship with him as I have with Paul, but I talk to Paul sometimes 12 or 15 times a day. My car phone and long distance bills are incredible. He and I come from the same vantage point on a lot of things. He understands references I make that nobody else would understand.

Keller: How does Dennis Coraluzzo, a longtime New Jersey and Philadelphia independent promoter, fit into all of this?

Gordon: We seem to go back and forth a lot. Whew.

Keller: Do you feel you owe him anything, either by action or inaction?

Gordon: I feel we had a gentleman's agreement that I would stay out of Jersey and he would stay out of Philly when we first got started. I was still running shows, even. I said, "I won't use your guys, you won't use my guys. You do whatever you want to do, I'll do whatever I want to do. Let's not be like you and Joel Goodhart were." He said, "I love it, no problem, that's

great." It started that way.

Of course, I grew and grew, and still didn't go to Jersey. Next thing I know, there's a card in Philadelphia here and he's using someone else as a front for him. It got uncomfortable. I said, "You know what, if that's the way it's going to be—if you can't be honorable with me, you know, what do you expect me to do? So of course I got angry. There was some heat there and then Dennis apologized and we sort of worked things out. Now I think he's doing a lot of out-of-state work, such as in Minneapolis and other places. He's running a show in February not far from where my TV goes and he's using Sabu on it (matched against Chris Benoit). To me, that's the same kind of philosophy. I don't want to get in a war with him and put Sabu-Benoit on the day before ten minutes away. I don't do things like that. But I don't think I would be reticent now to put on a show anywhere.

Keller: Let me get into the mind of a promoter, such as you or Dennis. Some fans would say, "What's wrong with giving Sabu extra work since you're not employing him full time?" "What's wrong with taking advantage of your television since you weren't running a show in that town that day?" "There isn't any innate right to any territory and Sabu is a free agent." How do you respond?

Gordon: The short answer is, if John Arezzi was running that show, it wouldn't bother me, but Dennis is the one I sat down with and like two gentlemen we came to an understanding. When he did that convention here in Philadelphia—got

involved in that—that was a real problem. That was basically Dennis saying to me, "I know we have an understanding, but that was only until I had a chance to make money." With me, I tell everybody this, you may not like what I say, but at least you know it's going to be the truth. I don't like when people try to work me.

Keller: Have you seen yourself compromising in ways that you thought you wouldn't have before you got this far into promoting—doing things you would have thought early on was sacrificing integrity but you now accept as part of being a promoter?

Gordon: I haven't compromised. What I have done, though, is slowly but surely gotten rid of whatever mark was there in the beginning. For instance, I'm a lot tougher negotiator now. In terms of payment, it used to be that someone could hold me up. If I told them I was giving them \$350, they would say I'm not coming in unless I get \$500—take it or leave it. I would give them the \$500. Now I'd say, "That's okay. Keep in touch." Next thing I know they're working for \$300 instead of \$350. I've learned a great deal about that. I'm fair. I never burn anybody, I never give them less than I promise them. If I say you're getting \$271, you can take it to the bank you're gonna' walk out of that arena that night with \$271—whether I make money or lose money. I figure as long as I keep doing that, people are going to at least respect what I'm doing.

Keller: Without violating an unsaid or said understanding you have with wrestlers, give me an idea of what your pay scale is?

Gordon: The pay for wrestlers ranges from \$100 to \$750.

Keller: Are there exceptions who might go over or under that amount?

Gordon: I haven't given anybody more than that yet, including the days when I could get held up. Plus I pay hotel and airfare. B.Y.O.B.

Keller: Final question. Is there anything you're embarrassed about or have changed in terms of you personally and the way you've handled situations or the way you entered into situations in the past?

Gordon: I think that once I left the fan part behind and entered into this as a business to the point where I'm thinking about turning this from not only a great product but into something that could generate an income for me, I think that changed the way I approached everything in the business. Match-making to who I bring in and don't bring in, how I treat those individuals. They can tell, too. Believe me, these guys are smart in that they know whether they can walk on you. People test you. That's pretty normal. But I think word is getting out now, which makes me feel good, that I'm fair. I get calls from workers in other promotions all the time, mainly WWF and WCW, who are going to be looking for work or already are looking for work. I don't know how many other promoters they call, but I know they

I'm a lot tougher negotiator now. In terms of payment, it used to be that someone could hold me up. If I told them I was giving them \$350, they would say I'm not coming in unless I get \$500—take it or leave it. I would give them the \$500. Now I'd say, "That's okay. Keep in touch." Next thing I know they're working for \$300 instead of \$350.

see this as a very viable place to work at this point. I think that the feeling throughout the industry is that we are a comer. In a year's time, we've done pretty well. I don't know what the normal time frame is to grow the way we have, but February will be two years that I've been in the business running my own company. I started the ECW after my TWA days, which I'd just as soon forget about.

I've never had an argument with one of the guys. There's been guys I've had to let go and I've always explained why. There was nothing they could say. The perfect example was when I suspended Johnny Hotbody for a while. Johnny and I are friends, but I told him he was spitting all the time. If he continued, I told him I would take him off the shows. He did, I took him off, and he understood completely. Rockin' Rebel did something inappropriate, used inappropriate racial remarks at a charity event one day at Ron Jaworski's place. I had to take him off. He's one of my most over heels. I said, "Hey, you've got to understand, that's not the way I do business. You want to work for me, that's great, and you know what, you're not irreplaceable, no matter how good of a push you're getting, the next guy will get just as big of one." He understood and he came back and he's been terrific ever since he came back. But I tell you, sitting around with these guys, listening to the war stories is great.

Keller: Is that the best part of running ECW, dealing with so many personalities and the stories they have to offer?

Gordon: The best part is actually the high of creating an angle or being part of its creation and then watching it unfold and then seeing that pop from the fans. It appeared in your head beforehand, but then when it comes to fruition, that's the greatest high I can ever see. It makes you feel good. You know you're doing something that people like. I know, too, there's times I'm going to do something people are going to hate.



Sabu

Wade Keller

ROAD WARRIOR HAWK

The following is a "Torch Talk" series with Road Warrior Hawk, formerly a member of the Legion of Doom with Animal. The two-hour interview with Hawk, real name Mike Hegstrand, was conducted Nov. 27 by telephone. Hawk talks about why he left the World Wrestling Federation immediately after SummerSlam '92, what he plans to do in the future, his use of steroids in pro wrestling, about his days in the AWA and NWA, and what he thinks of many of the promoters he has dealt with including Vince McMahon.

Wade Keller: Let's start with the obvious question. What went into your decision to leave the World Wrestling Federation?

Hawk: The way I was being treated. The fact that I was on the road ten years, 250 days a year. And I know what I'm worth and I wasn't getting paid what I was worth. I do believe that Animal and I were and have been top proven talent—I don't mean to sound big-headed—but we're good. And you've got guys, more power to them, that make all the money, who can't wrestle a lick and I could out-interview them in a coma. So he (Ultimate Warrior) is getting paid all this money. He held Vince McMahon up for money before, I never did anything like that before. We went in

and bitched about money before. And Vince made promises to me. He's very good at making promises, but he didn't keep them. And I got disgusted. Another thing is I wanted to do my own gig, which I'm doing now.

Keller: And now that you're not with the WWF you're mainly looking at Japan and Europe for work?

Hawk: Yes.

Keller: Anything in the States?

Hawk: If the money's right, I'll work for anybody.

Keller: Is there interest on WCW's part to bring you in either as a singles wrestler or to team with Kensuke Sasaki?

Hawk: I have no idea. They talked to me and said give me your Japanese schedule. But I'm not going to call them. If they want me, they can call me. I'm willing to work, but I'm not going to sign any contracts and it's going to be a nightly guarantee or I'm not coming in because I don't need them.

Keller: What was it about your stay in the WWF that you most enjoyed?

Hawk: They have a great production. They do good business. When you have a good crowd, that's good. Although business seems to be down, they still have better crowds than WCW. I like the professionalism they have, but I don't like to be lied to. I'm not a money-hungry monster in any regard, but I am in this business to make money. I do work my ass off and I expected to get paid accordingly. Vince McMahon seems to have a problem paying tag teams as much as he pays a singles wrestler. From what I understand from the marketing people, after Hogan left we were doing 23 to 24 percent of all sales. It didn't reflect in my merchandising checks. I paid my dues in this business. I didn't disrespect him. I didn't do anything wrong. So why stick it (to me)?

Keller: What were some of the promises Vince McMahon broke?

Hawk: Any promise he made as far as I'm concerned.

Keller: So you didn't find Vince McMahon to have much integrity?

Hawk: I think Vince McMahon is a very intelligent man. I don't have anything bad to say about him except I don't believe a word that comes out of his mouth. He's a promoter. Would you trust Don King with your child's piggy bank?

Keller: How was working for McMahon different from working for the NWA?

Hawk: It depends on whether you're talking about the NWA when Jim Crockett or Jim Herd ran it. Jim Herd don't know anything about our business. He hated guys like me and my partner from the get go because we were making

five-times the money. But we bounced around the ring like superballs, not him. He's the guy that came up with the Ding Dongs. Let's get real. How can he tell me about the business. I told him, "I've been in this business before you got in and I'll be in it after you're gone." I don't know what the problem is with that organization. Vince McMahon has made his empire on wrestling. He tried the WBF and personally, nothing toward Vince, but I'm glad it bombed out because here we are working our butts off, travelling all over, we work out every day, but we weren't given guaranteed contracts. These guys were given guaranteed money to sit around and workout in a gym?

Keller: What about the difference in locker room atmosphere between WCW and WWF?

Hawk: Well, I think in WCW it was a lot less cut-throat with a lot less stooges and more camaraderie. I think there were more cliques in the WWF. When people call me—which since I've left a lot of wrestlers have because I'm a stand-up guy... I'm not bragging about myself but I tell the truth. Being a stand-up guy is what gets you heat in this business because that's a challenge to Vince McMahon. He also wanted to tame the tiger. Well, the tiger doesn't need to be tamed. There's always mind games there. The job's tough enough and we do our job well. And WCW with Crockett was very relaxed.

Keller: Was that partially because there were such strong guarantees through the final couple of years of Crockett?

Hawk: Even before the guarantees, that was the case. I'll tell you what, when I was under the guaranteed contract, that made me feel like a prisoner. We walked out of the last six months of guaranteed money which was a sizable hunk of money. We're men of principle. I don't care how much you pay me, if I ain't happy, it don't mean nothing to me.

Keller: Was money the major factor in leaving the WWF or was the grind of the schedule more important?

Hawk: It was the tons of rules and regulations. Too many for me.

Keller: For instance.

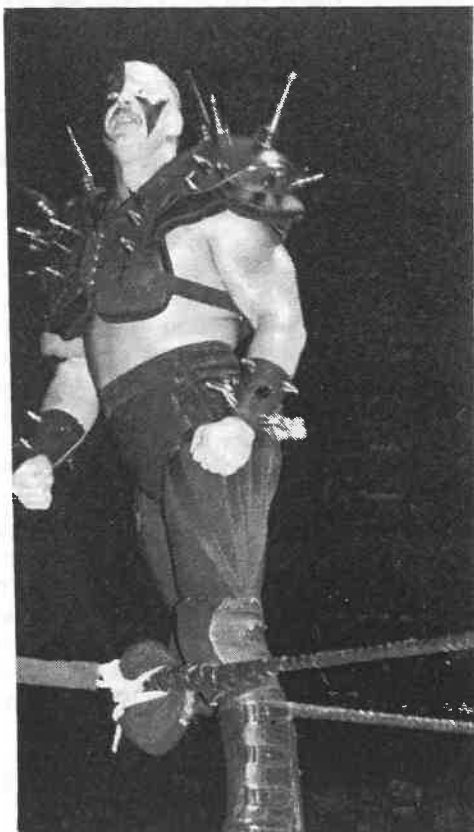
Hawk: I don't mind the drug testing, but why do I have to pee in a bottle because Vince McMahon brought it on.

Keller: What do you mean he brought it on?

Hawk: He was the one on the stand in the Zahorian trial, not me. I suffered. My reputation suffered.

Keller: What was it like being in the WWF during the Zahorian controversy with the *New York Post* stories on Pat Patterson?

Hawk: Pat Patterson, I don't have a bad thing to say about him. I got along with him fine. His name was always brought up because of his



Road Warrior Hawk

Wade Keller

Honor doesn't mean anything to a lot of people, but I'd rather be me than them any day. I had some very interesting conversations with promoters, especially Vince McMahon. My biggest qualm against him is he has insulted my intelligence on numerous occasions. He found out that I wasn't a guy who you get away with that with. He must be so bored with life he looks at us all as chess pieces. "How can I mess with this one." He became frustrated with me. I became a challenge.

sexual preferences. Well, Elton John is great at what he does and nobody ever questions that.

Keller: If Patterson abused his power—be it through sexual harassment of women or men—did he deserve to be held accountable?

Hawk: All I heard is what was in the media and the papers. Everybody knows that he is gay, which I have no problem with. It certainly was obvious to him that I'm heterosexual and I'm not the kind of guy you want to go asking them kind of questions to. I had no problem with him. I also respect Vince McMahon. He's the most successful promoter.

Keller: Speaking of the scandals in general, what do you think about steroids being illegal in the first place?

Hawk: I think them testing is a good thing because it's gotten to this point that everybody is equal. That is the strongest, most rigorously tested company, period.

Keller: How did the usage of steroids change from when you were first there to when you left?

Hawk: Well, they ceased. There was no getting around it. But it's for the better.

Keller: You're in favor of the level playing field that ideally will be the result of vigorous testing?

Hawk: If someone's going to be tested, it should be everybody, but I don't necessarily

know that that was a fact. Vince has his favorites and he treats other people differently. A hard thing for me to understand—I have nothing personally against the Ultimate Warrior—he stood up Vince at SummerSlam last year for money right before he was supposed to go out to the ring. He used my lawyer, so I know the whole situation. Okay. Call me biased, I'm not a braggart, but I could wrestle circles around that guy. In anybody's field, knowing you're better and more capable of your job than a guy who's not as capable or not as professional getting paid more (is frustrating).

Keller: Would you rather have been promoted differently, either as a team with Animal or as a singles wrestler? Should you personally have had a more prominent role?

Hawk: Yes, by far. Listen, it's always been with us, "Aw, these guys, we don't have to push them because they're so over." I always looked at it like this—and me and Animal have talked about this—we're very fortunate in this business, but you don't just end up at the top. If the door is opened, you either walk through it or it gets slammed in your face. Well, we ran through it and we were consistent. And we did more as a tag team than any other tag team has ever done. It's one thing to get to the top, it's another thing to stay there. I gauge what your value is by the response you get from the crowd. Another thing is also, if you're one of Vince McMahon's own creations or babies, it's a different story for you. We weren't his babies. I told him many times there were other things I wanted to do. I told him I wanted to commentate. Heenan, Ventura, and Gorilla are the best. I could blow their doors off. If I sound like a braggart, that's too bad, but I'm confident with myself. I mean, if I wasn't, I wouldn't be a professional in my eyes. I don't think a lot of people were used right.

Keller: What went into the decision for you and Animal not to stick together?

Hawk: Well, Animal didn't know I was going to quit. It was something I talked about a long time. I subtly let him know about it. I let him know it was time to stop talking and start walking. He said, "I stand to make more money here." I told him, "Let's see if you can," but it must've went right over his head. Nobody knew (I was leaving).

Keller: You called the WWF offices the day after SummerSlam to let Vince McMahon know you were gone.

Hawk: I called the day I knew Vince got back to the office.

Keller: What was his reaction when you told him?

Hawk: I didn't talk to him. I talked to his secretary. I told 'em the truth, "Due to mental stress and physical duress, I've had it." There's other things to life. I can work doing what I'm doing now, make a very comfortable living, get

treated like a human being, have my expenses paid for, have the promotion be appreciative, and get some pride back in my work.

Keller: Did you see you and Animal growing apart, not as a tag team, but as friends over the last couple of years?

Hawk: No. I just saw that I wanted to do my own thing.

Keller: Have you been in contact with Animal since you quit?

Hawk: Some, but not much.

Keller: Do you see yourself possibly teaming with him again?

Hawk: Well, I don't know what he's doing. I've heard some stories. I've heard other people say he is going to become an agent for Vince which I find hard to believe. I don't think he's done any wrestling. I heard because of a tailbone injury he was going to collect Lloyd's of London. I have no idea what his disability is but I heard that and I had already cut my deal for Japan and he's calling me and trying to negotiate a deal with me in Japan, so I'm mixed up on that.

Keller: How much longer do you want to be in the wrestling business?

Hawk: I tell you what, I feel now controlling my own schedule working for the Japanese who I respect and who are honorable, there's no aggravation or bull. The promotion guys are my friends. I feel as excited about it as when I did about the second year in the business when I got a grasp and knew what I was doing in this business... I deal with Masa Saito and Brad Rheingans.

Keller: Do you ever get tired of the recognition factor? Do you ever wish you could go to the mall and not be inundated with autograph seekers and people recognizing you?

Hawk: First of all, I have a different philosophy than a lot of guys. And no it doesn't bother me. I see a lot of guys who are rude to people who ask for autographs. I'm the opposite. The reason for that is not to be a goody two shoes, it's because if people aren't coming up to you to shake your hand or ask for an autograph, that means you're not very good at what you do. It's a compliment when they do. They're your bread and butter and that's just part of the territory.

I've met a lot of professional athletes, entertainers who didn't have the same philosophy I do. I think mine is right. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think that's morally right. If I see somebody, I don't care if it's Frank Sinatra or somebody else, and they're rude in that type of situation, I'll be the first one to tell them that I think they're a piece of sh-- as a human being.

Keller: What do you see yourself doing in 20 or 25 years?

Hawk: I don't see myself wrestling.

Keller: What are your other interests outside of wrestling?

Hawk: Acting. Voice-over business, which I'm working on now, but it's very tough to crack into. I find it very easy to do radio, very easy. If none of that pays off, I see myself doing charity and good things for people. It makes me feel good. I've been involved in that a lot in the past and it has been important to me.

Keller: How did you originally get involved in the wrestling business?

Hawk: Eddie Sharkey broke in Jesse Ventura and Bob Backlund. I met Eddie at a restaurant in Downtown (Minneapolis) with several large bouncers. He was impressed by our size. He said he hadn't run a camp lately. We said, "Would you do it again?" The first four that he took which started it all over again for him was my ex-partner, myself, Repoman, and Rick Rude. He has by far and away produced more top talent than anybody. Minnesota seems to be quite a hotbed for wrestlers. Must be the water.

Keller: How did you originally connect with Animal and Paul Ellering?

Hawk: Paul Ellering was another Minnesota native. I knew Animal working out in gyms before I got into wrestling. He was the original Road Warrior. Ole (Anderson) hired him and sent him down to North Carolina where (Jim) Crockett (Jr.) started him. Matt Borne got involved in rape allegations and he and Buzz Sawyer, rest his soul, were tag team champions. They got bad media on it, so they fired Matt Borne and Ole put me and Animal together.

Keller: Did you have any clue going in you were...

Hawk: I had no clue, period. I had three matches under my belt of which each one I was so nervous I threw up after each one.

Keller: Did you have any idea that you and Animal would turn into a major force in tag team history?

Hawk: We really didn't. It took two years before we realized it. We were hot from the beginning. It would have never happened without the guidance of Paul Ellering.

Keller: Tell me about what Paul did for your career.

Hawk: He was a legitimate manager who when we were independent, booked us, lined up flights, reservations at hotels, everything. He has a genius IQ. At the end of the year he had a computer print out of all of our expenses. He was a legitimate manager and the highest paid manager in the history of this business.

Keller: What is your relationship with him now?

Hawk: Three weeks ago I was up visiting him. You have to remember when we walked out of WCW, we walked out on a lot of money. Herd was gonna try to screw Paul Ellering out of his

money, which I coerced him — maybe in somewhat an aggressive manner — that all he had to do was give us, me and Animal, a release and he'd save himself a lot of money, but he better damn well pay Paul Ellering. When Paul called me out of the blue when I was in the WWF and said he wanted to work, the next day he had a job. I think Vince McMahon is making a very big mistake, having him under contract and not using him right now. He is a great talker as a heel or babyface manager. I mean, he's very versatile.

Keller: What was the best part about working for the AWA?

Hawk: I was home. I enjoyed it very much. Verne Gagne was a very good payoff man, but it ended up the pay wasn't worth it. We were the only tag team there that worked for two major promotions at once and independents. So we called our shots. Promoters would call us and we would take what dates we wanted, which was a great luxury. The reason we had that luxury was because we brought people to the building. Even though Verne was a good payoff man, he was very tough to deal with.

Keller: In what way?

Hawk: It was his way or the highway. So when it was his way or the highway and we didn't agree with it, we simply took our wrestling tights off and dressed and started to leave.

Keller: In the AWA when you became so popular, the promotion began matching you against heels instead of babyfaces. It almost had to be done since the popular Fabulous Ones were being booed against you. Do you ever regret switching to that role of accepting fans cheers?

Hawk: We didn't switch nothing. The fans liked us from the get-go. The fans like Freddie Krueger and The Terminator. They respected our work in the ring and they liked that we did nothing but power moves.

Keller: Would you have changed anything about the way your tag team was portrayed by the AWA in your stint there, or were you happy with your role?

Hawk: Every promoter, from Vince McMahon on down, after they realized how over we were, they never concentrated on pushing us any further, which we realized we had to do on our own. At times, because of the promoters' egos, they tried to hold us down, but it didn't work because we didn't change a thing and the people liked it. Bottom line. The promoters want control. They want to be the boss. Big egos. Bill Watts, ego. Vince McMahon, ego. Verne Gagne, ego. Crockett, I wouldn't put in the same category. I mean, he has an ego, but he treated me fairly. He knew what we were worth and he paid us what we were worth. He knew our value. He appreciated us.

Keller: What do you think of Verne Gagne as a person?

Hawk: Not much.

Keller: How is his personality different from his TV personality to the extent that so many wrestlers I've interviewed dislike him?

Hawk: Because he's a bad person. Because at one time he told me when they begged us to come in, wooed us to come in, and when we had disagreements, he would make idiotic statements like, "Twenty years ago I'd have tied you in a knot." It's a dumb thing to say.

Keller: What do you think of him as a promoter?

Hawk: I think he stepped on too many toes and that's why he fell to the wayside and you ended up with two major promotions. He did not progress and change. He did not adapt with the changes in the business and go with the flow. He was too set in his ways.

Keller: What about Greg? Why didn't Greg Gagne pick up the AWA where Verne left off?

Hawk: Because he didn't have respect from any of the boys (wrestlers). Even his own father held him down. You have to earn respect. To get a friend, you have to be a friend. And I always had a hard time understanding why a promoter—virtually every one of them except Crockett—would put you in main events all the time, pay you well, but at the same time treat you like shit.

Keller: Earlier you said you don't have anything against Vince McMahon. What do you think of him?

Hawk: I think he's very intelligent, very successful, obviously. I do not agree with the



Vince McMahon

Wade Keller

mind games he plays. I do not agree with how he treats people. I do not agree with anybody who makes promises but is horrible at keeping them.

Keller: Is that the general attitude of wrestlers toward Vince McMahon?

Hawk: Well, there's been quite an exodus since I left. I think they're getting fed up.

Keller: What do you think about the state of the business in general? Will Vince McMahon stay on top?

Hawk: Who's gonna challenge him. He's got a whole new market, Europe. It's time to give it a rest in the States. It will be back.

Keller: What do you think it will take to come back? Obviously wrestling goes in cycles, but if promoters don't do anything, attendance won't return to previous levels.

Hawk: I think they need to quit overexposing it. Quit saturating it. Maybe go back to old school.

Keller: In what way?

Hawk: First of all, when I started, there was an issue between us and another tag team. In the old school we would make it last long, to create issues constantly to create interest, you'd have long runs. You don't see that anymore. You'll see a guy who I adore and think is one of the greatest talents to come into the business, get immediately hot and right away he's fighting who's got the belt. What's left after that? The old way was you get a guy hot and you make the people wait to see it. The first thing Vince did was stick us with Demolition. He should have made the people wait until they were drooling. Promoters have thought, since we were always so over, they would concentrate on getting everybody else over and use us to get them over. They could have hurt us, but we didn't let it happen. I didn't quite understand that. I'm willing to help everybody, because if you do things right, everybody makes more money. I got used to it. You can only take so much shit so long.

Keller: What is it about Japanese wrestling that United States promoters would benefit from emulating?

Hawk: Treat their talent like human beings. Pay them what they're worth. In Japan, everyone has a position. They're not held down. If they improve, their position improves. It's very simple.

Keller: Do you think that when times are good, like they have been in Japan, there is less of a tendency for promoters to be so insecure that they treat the talent poorly as has been the case in this country?

Hawk: I've seen times good with just as much bickering and I've seen times good where there wasn't bickering.

Keller: What is it about Japanese wrestling

that the promoters in this country should not emulate because of societal or cultural differences?

Hawk: The whole Japan society is based on respect. Americans have a lot to learn from them. First of all, they're honorable. When they look you in the eye and make a promise, they keep their promise. To make a promise and not hold to it is to lose face. It's not cut-throat over there.

Keller: But is there stuff that works in Japan that wouldn't work in the States? For instance, in Japan they don't have heels and babyfaces as clearly defined as in the States.

Hawk: Fans over there, they just want to see good wrestling. There are fan favorites.

Keller: But they don't run angles.

Hawk: When I flew over in the 20th and wrestled on the 23rd, Scott Norton & Tony Holmes took the belts from the Steiners. The very next night, Scott was in a six-man against Tony Holmes. There's no psychology, but at the same time there is. Because the psychology there is this: give them their money's worth. The Japanese people don't buy the American style. They don't like the cutesie stuff. They like hard work, solid wrestling. The style is much more aggressive.

Keller: Do you sense a lot of wrestlers don't respect fans enough to believe they can tell the difference between a good and bad match, a sincere effort and a lazy effort?

Hawk: You can't fool the fans anywhere.

Keller: But do you think the wrestlers in the States think they can fool the fans?

Hawk: I don't think that's what goes through their minds. I think they get frustrated by the promoters and how they're treated, how they're paid, how they're appreciated. The American promoters, everyone I've worked for—I've been fortunate enough to be the top guy—act like they're doing me a favor. Well, why don't they get in the ring and see how much people come. They're making more money than I am, so who's doing who the favor. What have they got without wrestlers?

And that's what Vince McMahon is going to find out. I've seen every promoter I've ever worked for be on top and go right down the tubes. Verne Gagne, Jim Crockett, and I think Vince is on the way. The only thing I think that's going to save him is Europe. But I think he's going to burn it out.

Keller: What can be done by U.S. promoters to prevent burnout in Europe?

Hawk: There's no storyline. It's new over there. It's hotter than anything over there. It's always been hot. In Japan, the wrestlers are treated well, appreciated, paid well, which means they go out there and have pride and work hard for their money but when you're getting abused 250 days a year, you're not going to perform as well.

Keller: How much of that stress level do you think led to drug use among wrestlers in this country?

Hawk: When you're under stress, you're not happy. What I've learned and seen, either you do drugs for kicks and enjoyment and I'm not condoning them, or you see the opposite and people are unhappy and escaping. That's what I saw more of, people escaping.

Keller: Did wrestlers ever put pressure on each other to do drugs, or was it an individualistic thing?

Hawk: It depends on the individual. Some were open, some weren't.

Keller: Were steroids accepted as just part of the business by all of you guys?

Hawk: Especially when it wasn't a Class-A Narcotic. It was just part of your workout routine and you did whatever you could to enhance your body.

Keller: Did wrestlers generally not worry about long term considerations?

Hawk: In my fifteen years of lifting, I've known and seen a lot of steroids, okay. But I've seen very few people have side effects, but that's not to say it won't happen. I have heard of some. But, for the majority that are doing it, the percentage is very small. Now long term, who knows. My mother never smoke or drank, she was born and raised on a farm, was very religious, lived a clean life, and died of leukemia, so if your number's up, your number's up. It's like Lyle Alzado. I was good friends with him. He did steroids, and he admitted it, twenty to thirty thousand dollars a year on steroids for football. Then he blamed it on human growth hormone.

Keller: I don't know how much you want to get into any personal experience you have had with steroids, but have you ever had any side effects, either physical or psychological?

Hawk: No, because when I did steroids—past tense—I was under a doctor's guidance. All the doctor could tell you was how your liver and kidneys were functioning and if they weren't functioning right, he'd tell you to get off.

Keller: You use the words "past tense." Was it tough to get off of steroids?

Hawk: No, not when it was a Class A narcotic. You just have to work harder in the gym.

Keller: Do you think a lot of wrestlers who got off steroids recently have had trouble getting off of them?

Hawk: I know that myself I was never psychologically hung up on them. It was a game. When you used them, you got gains. When you were off of them, if you got off—which a lot of guys didn't and is where you really start running a risks because you don't let your system recover—those guys who didn't get off are the ones who couldn't handle the decrease when the

cycle ceased.

Keller: Do you think with proper cycling, steroids are not all that bad if one knows how to use them in cycles under a doctor's guidance?

Hawk: Let me answer your question with a question. Why does it say on every bottle of steroids made by the big companies, "This does not enhance athletic ability?" That's a total lie. Let me ask you this question. As it became a Class A narcotic and the federal agents were very hot on them, where they became more consumed with steroids than cocaine, which is a much larger problem, all the black market steroids that were legit, where'd they come from? They came out of where they were produced. If the Feds wanted to get to the bottom line, seems pretty obvious to me all they had to do was infiltrate to see where they were coming from. Why hasn't that ever been discussed? Maybe the Feds wouldn't have a job then. You're trying to tell me if this country could defeat the fourth largest army in 14 days, that they couldn't employ the military to stop the flow of drugs into the country? It's a con, it's a work, there's a lot of money being made. That's my belief.

Keller: What do you regret most about your career in pro wrestling?

Hawk: What I regret is getting suspended that one time. But out of everything bad, something good comes. What I regret is watching life pass me by. I regret the lack of personal life.

Keller: You're 35 now?

Hawk: Just about.

Keller: Do you have any family?

Hawk: I'm divorced, no kids. There is no personal life when you're on the road 250 days a year.

Keller: Would you trade in some of the money and some of the fame that you've had over the last ten years for a lot more personal time?

Hawk: That's what I'm doing. I've walked away on guaranteed money on more than one occasion. I really don't regret anything. I've been very, very fortunate. But my qualms, my bitches, are that I've missed a lot in life, that a lot of it passed me by. It got to the point where I said, "Hey, there's more to it."

Keller: I don't know how often you cross paths with Paul Orndorff, but he told me the same thing about a year and a half ago, that he regrets being on the road so often as his kids were growing up.

Hawk: I can't even imagine what that would be like. It's tough enough without kids.

Keller: What are your impressions of what Hulk Hogan did for the business—or to the business, as some people would suggest?

Hawk: He put it on the map as the Muhammad

Ali. I know him personally. He's a great friend. He's humble, not big-headed. I've walked with him through airports. I've walked with a lot of entertainers and big names, but I've never walked anywhere with someone who received as much notoriety. His head is not blown up. He is my friend. He is honest. How in the hell can Billy "Superstar" Graham condemn him when Graham was one of the biggest abusers of steroids to the point where it crippled him. And you've got guys like Jesse Ventura who used to claim he never did them. Well, I worked down at his gym. That's just like when he said he played for San Diego State when he announced for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and it came out in the sports section that no Jim Janos or Jesse Ventura ever did. And he's gonna condemn Hulk Hogan? Wade, Hulk Hogan paid out of his own pocket for one of Billy "Superstar" Graham's hip replacements. What they are is disgruntled. They pissed their money away and they're gonna knock the business? It's not my generation's fault as a wrestler they're in the situation they're in. How can a guy who's guilty of taking steroids like the individuals I'm talking about condemn another one who did the same thing. It's like this. Society is pretty screwed up in its thoughts. How many professional athletes get busted with illegal drugs? The public immediately looks at that human as a criminal and a crumb and a scum. But the very next day one of his teammates can turn himself into drug treatment and he's a hero. They did the same thing.

Keller: A lot of criticism came for Hogan because of the Arsenio Hall Show appearance where he denied ever using steroids except for a couple times to aid in an injury. I got the feeling people got insulted with celebrities who protect their own careers to an absurd level.

Hawk: Okay, but listen. Hogan was making movies when Brian Bosworth was on the football field. He was one of the first guys to get nailed for steroids. Do you believe his line that he took three anovar a week? You might as well take three aspirin. He did the same damn thing. The bottom line is, we all make mistakes, but that does not make you a bad person. Right now, if any athlete got busted for any illegal drug, the press would condemn them. But would they write about the charity functions he did? The crippled kids he visited in the hospital? The dying kids he visited in the hospital? Because I've done it. They don't write that because it doesn't sell newspapers. It's a cryin' shame. Hulk Hogan has visited dying children, he's gone out of his way more than anyone else I know, put wrestling on the map, has not changed, is not big headed, is a good person. But that's not looked at.

Keller: Ever since the string of bad publicity Hogan has received, there have been friends of his coming to his defense, such as you and Wayne Ferris, talking about the good side of Hogan and admitting his mistakes, but

claiming the coverage of his good deeds was ignored.

Hawk: The good he did outweighs the bad. Who's he hurting if he did steroids besides himself?

Keller: The argument is, Hogan, by being pushed as a superhero with such megasize was encouraging kids to value massive size as a goal to be attained and the only way to get that size would be through steroid use. And that was the argument that was made. And it wasn't just that he set that example, but then when given the chance to be honest about it on national television, he lied about it. It's a matter of being a role model and he made money off of that role model status. As a result, he should live up to the strict characteristics demanded of a role model.

Hawk: Then our biggest role model should be the President and whether he inhaled marijuana or not, it's a drug and he's running our country.

Keller: It's not even a matter of saying that because other people did wrong, that makes what Hogan did okay. I think people want to look at each case individually, right or wrong. Hogan placed himself in the public eye voluntarily by accepting promoters' money and booking dates, and who can blame him, but I think the point is, he also has to take the bad with the good, admit mistakes that were made and not make them in the future. But, obviously, when you're someone like Hogan, the impression I have from talking to different wrestlers is that the thought process centers on what can be done to further their current career path, not longterm implications. Is that



Road Warriors

Wade Keller

the case?

Hawk: That makes sense, very much so.

Keller: Should the blame lie with the promoters who have given main event status to the steroid using wrestler?

Hawk: You're f---in' right, it's the promoters. On one occasion, Vince McMahon said, "What do you want, you look great." Vince McMahon was never accused or proven that he did steroids, but I questioned his legal counsel to get up there and admit it. It's also the doctors' faults.

Keller: When the leaders of that business are encouraging it and making steroid use the pathway to the top, it's really that pathway to the top that the media and a lot of wrestlers and even Billy Graham—and you can question his motives—are criticizing. Graham saw that the pathway to his success was paved by Vince McMahon. Admittedly, he was a pioneer and was the first one to really capitalize on it, so he paved his own path in a sense. But he sees that now.

Hawk: I'm proud of the fact that he learned from his mistakes. We all have. If you don't learn from your mistakes, I feel bad for you. But that doesn't make it right to condemn anybody else. There's a lot of guys who are condemning him, like Bruno Sammartino. How can he get up and condemn Hogan when I know for a fact his son did them? Steroids didn't help his son a bit because he didn't have the talent.

Keller: It's unfortunate that Sammartino's jealousy for Hogan's success interferes with what I believe is an otherwise sincere message.

Hawk: I've had good times and bad times, but never in my life will I badmouth. I will badmouth how promotions treat their talent and use their talent. I will badmouth how stooges are rewarded. I badmouth Vince McMahon for the fact that there were repeat offenders. You're supposed to get two shots and be out the door, but there were some who had more chances. I regret that some when they got nailed had a warning and some didn't. It's one way for everybody, and if it's not that way, it's wrong. You've probably heard stories of Ultimate Warrior quitting, but shortly before that he failed a urine test? Vince McMahon said, according to several wrestlers I talked to, "Somebody must have put something in his IcoPro." Let me tell you a story and I hope you print it. We all weaned off steroids. I got suspended for something else. When I got back from my suspension, and we're all weaning off steroids, Vince McMahon takes me aside—this is when they were making the transition from Dr. Daly to Dr. Pasqualli. Pasqualli had just come in, Daly was out, but did the last urine test. After getting suspended, how idiotic would it be for me to come back and within two weeks get suspended again? And Vince McMahon took me aside and said, "Mike, as if your luck hasn't been bad enough lately. You tested positive for

Winstrol. I said, "That is impossible. I will tell you, that is not the case. I haven't taken a shot of any steroids for six months. I just got off a suspension. Do you think I'd be that idiotic." He said, "Evidently it wasn't injectables, it was orals." That's where he blew his cover because I know oral or injectable, it shows up the same. I said, "Hey, do you think I'm an idiot? They show up the same, oral and injectable. I'm not on either of them." It was one of his little mind games. It was to try to tame the tiger, to scare me, as he had done on many occasions. He insulted my intelligence, but he never won one verbal battle with me. And that's a fact. He said, "Well, you call Dr. Daly. See what he says." So I did. He said I tested positive. I said, "Let me tell you something, if I tested positive, then I took them. But that's impossible, because I didn't." It's like being accused of murdering somebody by strangulation and you're a quadriplegic. So Daly stuck to the accusation. So I go see Vince and he's sitting with the new Dr. Pasqualli. He asked what Daly said. I said, "He said I tested positive." I said, "That's impossible." Vince looked at Pasqualli, Pasqualli looked at Vince, and Pasqualli looked at me and said, "I've dealt with a lot of athletes. You look like you're telling the truth. I looked at your chart. Dr. Daly read it wrong." I think it was a mind game. I don't need that aggravation.

Keller: Were there other mind games going on with different styles of chart reading?

Hawk: Dr. Daly was an employee of Vince McMahon. I wasn't on Winstrol, he says I was. That's part of the game. Daly was involved in the Olympic testing, the AAU Committee doctor. I know of wrestlers who say they were injected by Daly when they were competing in track. You don't think Dr. Pasqualli ever did steroids? He was a powerlifter. Jesse Ventura was a spokesman at one time for a national anti-steroid campaign. At that time I'm sure he was clean and more power to him. I used to work out in his gym. I was making no money and he discouraged me and every one of these guys who came out of Minnesota, saying we'd never make it. Why would you discourage anybody? He claimed he wasn't on steroids. When I was on steroids and someone asked me, I'd say, "You're damn right, I'm on them." I've been around guys who are all juiced up and they say no, and I say, "What do you think, I'm an idiot?"

So one day, I'm in the gym. Ventura was siding with Superstar Graham, condemning Hogan. I said, "Listen, if not for steroids, you would have never gotten into wrestling like you did. And if it wasn't for steroids, the President of the Physical Fitness Council, Arnold Schwarzenegger, appointed by President Bush, you're trying to tell me he never did steroids? Without steroids, you'd never be where you're at and neither would Arnold Schwarzenegger to hire you for the movies." And Arnold Schwarzenegger is an idol of mine, he's gone a

long way. Lee Haney's going nowhere after bodybuilding. He's got no charisma. So I respect Arnold. He smoked a joint right on tape on Pumping Iron, and he's appointed by the President? Nobody ever says anything about that.

Keller: That appointment by Bush was an obvious pandering to box office appeal and not sincere qualifications.

Hawk: The only reason steroids got heat is because of the black market and the government is not making any money off of it. They're not a mind-altering drug. Well, when I did take steroids, I didn't get aggressive and I sure knew the hell what I was doing. I didn't kill nobody.

Keller: Obviously the worry is about people who can't handle steroids. An example that comes to mind, although steroids weren't necessarily the cause, is when football player Keith Millard told police his arms were more powerful than their guns. Whether that involved steroids or not, it's that type of aggressiveness that might come from steroids that officials are worried about.

Hawk: Oh, Keith Millard. Funny you should mention him, one of my favorite people to hate. Oh yeah, I met him. See, what comes around, goes around. I'm glad he blew his knees. When I met him, I told the owner of the bar to please get him away from me because he was insulting. If I was the cop he told that to, I would have put a bullet through his arm and gone, "Oh, really?"

Keller: I'm sure that thought went through their minds.

Hawk: When I met him, he was very immature. He had a mentality of maybe 13 years old. Very insecure. I've noticed that a good majority of athletes are very insecure, which I find a hard time understanding.

Keller: That's ironic considering the fame and money these people achieve.

Hawk: This is my philosophy. I think it's right to treat people good, to treat people as you'd like to be treated. If someone asks you for an autograph, take it as a compliment because the day they're not asking you for autographs, you're washed up. And there's two kinds of people I've noticed in entertainment, whether they're musicians or actors or athletes. Those that never forgot who they were and are thankful and realize every day that they're blessed. And the other ones forgot who they were. I've met them. More than one. And I'm not going to mention names, but they're bigger stars than I'll ever be, but in my eyes, they're not a star as far as being a human being. So in my eyes, they're junk and I tell them, and what are they going to do about it? I like to get along with everybody because the greatest treasure in life is a friendship.

Keller: Do you still talk with Jesse Ventura?

Hawk: I do, but I'll never forget him discouraging me. And he'll have the audacity, not him, but his wife to call me to ask me to help

him on his fundraiser—and Hogan. There's a guy who forgot who Jim Janos was a long time ago. Why would you discourage anybody from ascertaining their goals. I have a real big problem with that. Even though he discouraged me because he said it wasn't going to happen, I just gave it a shot.

Keller: In what ways has Jesse Ventura forgotten where he came from?

Hawk: I'll tell you what. I'm not scared to say anything. I have no respect for the man. Jesse most of the time is talking about Jesse. Just my experiences with him, he has done some very audacious things where I question his judgement. I don't agree with the way he is. What if a story came out that Bill Clinton discouraged a young person? What sense, what motive is there for it? I hadn't even started. Maybe I would have made it big, gotten in the ring with him, and made him some money. That's mayor of a city. I guess I should run. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in helping people. I just on the 11th and 12th with Ken Kaiser, American League Umpire had top baseball players and wrestlers for a children's home. I don't want no pat on the back. If any charity comes up to me and offers me money to be at their event, I say, sure I'll take the check, but it goes right to the charity. Okay. Next four days I went to Brooklyn and I went and visited with the police, the high schools, these are rough neighborhoods, wrestling teams, basketball teams, not for a pat on the back, but because I've experienced things and they look up to me. I should do that. I believe in Heaven and Hell, but I'm not just doing this to get to Heaven. I mean, like I said, to me it's much easier to help people than to not. I don't understand. I'll tell you what, when I go out in public—not so much in Minneapolis because I frequent certain spots and everybody knows me here, although I do get mistaken for Jesse Ventura a lot, which is kind of ironic, isn't it?—I never get in trouble. I don't want people to be intimidated by me. I meet people who are intimidated by me. I'm not saying that's right, that's just the way I am. But I've been blessed. The best part of my life are my friends. Birds of a feather flock together. You don't go up to people and go, "I want you to be my friend, but there are the qualities you need to have."

You find each other. I've had a very interesting life and I thank God for it, but when I go out in public and someone goes out of their way to harass me, they're gonna have to hit me, because I'm not going to give my hard-earned money away, but I've got the right to defend myself. I have a very hard time with that. It means there's no sense to it, and yet it happens and happens and happens. It'll happen again.

Keller: Who are some of the people in the business you especially admire?

Hawk: Terry Funk, rest his soul Bruiser Brody, Stan Hansen, Paul Ellering of course,

there's many of them. I have a lot of friends. There's one characteristic that covers your character, period. Honor. I've got nothing without my word. Nobody can ever come up to me and say, "I said this and dishonored it." I might as well stick a gun in my mouth and kill myself. I've got nothing without it. Honor doesn't mean anything to a lot of people, but I'd rather be me than them any day. I had some very interesting conversations with promoters, especially Vince McMahon. My biggest qualm against him is he has insulted my intelligence on numerous occasions. He found out that I wasn't a guy who you get away with that with. He must be so bored with life he looks at us all as chess pieces. "How can I mess with this one." He became frustrated with me. I became a challenge. I didn't ask for it, I did my job. He respects a stand-up guy, but then he's going to sit there and test him. That's not in the contract. That's not being a pro. Mark my words, I hope not, but as I see it, my prediction is Vince McMahon will have his day like every other promoter I've seen. What comes around goes around.

Keller: Does it seem like most promoters don't learn from the demise of other promoters in the past?

Hawk: They just think they're superior, especially now because he doesn't have much competition.

Keller: What is your impression of Bill Watts in your dealings with him?

Hawk: He is every bit as crazy as Vince McMahon is. He's crazy. He's a tyrant. He's a controller. It's his way or the highway. He talks down to you like you're an idiot. That's why Scott Steiner told him, basically, "Get the f— away from me before I beat the crap outta' ya'." He's not my kind of guy. He never messed with me, Animal, and Paul Ellering. There was no reason to because we were drawing money and we were going in and out doing shots for him. But I could see in a short time what he was like. The Steiners called me several times when they were negotiating with Vince, they asked me a lot of questions, and I did not discourage them from going there. I just told them what I know. I told them the best thing they will have is very good exposure. In my eyes, right now they're the greatest tag team.

Keller: They have innovated in the ring.

Hawk: Just like we did, just in a different way. They don't have big heads, they're fun, they're pranksters, they can laugh all the time, and they stand up to their principles.

Keller: What are the main differences between Rick and Scott?

Hawk: They're very close. I would say that Rick is the silent leader, but Scotty is very vocal. Maybe that stems from him not having a family. If you have a family, your security is your job. In my situation I didn't have a family, my partner

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did. I also had confidence. For a long time I wanted to be a singles wrestler. I always wished I would have been, although I've been very successful in my career with my partner. It was every bit as much him as it was me. We complimented each other, but I'd rather make my own decisions and be my own boss because I felt tied down. I felt as a single I would have had a lot of different opportunities and excelled.

Keller: Will you have any singles matches in Japan?

Hawk: No, I'll be teaming with Kensuke Sasaki. I couldn't ask for a better partner. He's young, he wants to learn. I've never had a better situation. I've never been happier.

Keller: What are some of the things you are doing with your time now that you're not wrestling full-time for the WWF?

Hawk: I'll tell you what, I get a big thrill out of drinkin' a six-pack of beer and watching television until I fall asleep. Little things aren't so little when you don't have them. Last night I spent the second Thanksgiving with my family in the last ten years. This February I'm throwing a benefit for Jerry Haff, the police officer who was slain in Minneapolis by the gang members. I never met him, but I'm throwing a benefit for him at a sportsbar and I'm auctioning off sports memorabilia for his family. I've never met his family, and I don't want a pat on the back. It's just a good thing to do. If I'm not wrestling, I'll help out in a heartbeat. If you can put a smile on someone's face, Wade, that's a great compliment. Imagine this, a kid was dying of leukemia. Make-a-Wish said he could do whatever he wanted. He could have gone to Disneyland. But he said he wanted to meet me and Animal. It's hard to see an adult dying, much less a kid. He said, "I'm glad you can make it. My doctor told me I only have a couple days to live." Stoically he said it, like a man. He's prepared. I said I had to go to the bathroom. I didn't have to go to the bathroom. I went to ball my eyes out.

Keller: Is there anything else you'd like to get involved in?

Hawk: I'd love to act because it's a challenge. I don't care. You give me a role, I can do it. I know I can. Whether it happens or not, I can't control that. I'm going to pursue the voice-over business. I don't know if it's going to pan out, but I didn't know if the wrestling was going to work, either. I'll give it a shot. I'll always be involved in charity. I think that stems from my parents. They were givers. It's a good feeling. It's so simple, to me, to be that way. It's hard to understand how you could be any way but. I would be doing charity regardless of whether I had ever been in the so-called limelight.

Keller: Could a wrestling union ever form?

Hawk: It'll never happen. It's the biggest business that's not unionized.

Keller: Why not.

Hawk: There's prelim guys, middle guys, and main event guys, and I'm not gonna be affected, but it certainly could effect other guys, their livelihood. If it were feasible, it would have been done.

Keller: Do you think people like you and Hulk Hogan, when you were there, had the power to unionize the wrestlers?

Hawk: There's not enough wrestlers that would stick with it that would have the possibility. Hogan's the man. It's been tried before and shut down. I know the guys who tried it, it cost them their careers.

Keller: That's the one thing Wayne Ferris, who was complimentary of Hogan, said he wished Hogan had used his power when he was really on top to do, create a union, and help the wrestlers less fortunate than he over the long run.

Hawk: Don't think it didn't run through his mind. I'm telling ya', it'll never happen. There are a lot of intangibles involved. Everybody's situation is different. A lot of people don't have the luxury of splitting from an established tag team and go their own way like I did.

Keller: You're not impressed with Bill Watts as a human being?

Hawk: I'd rather be me than Bill Watts. The boys down there are more happy than they've ever been, even the ones on guaranteed contracts.

Keller: Do you think outside of dealing with wrestlers he has wrestling savvy?

Hawk: Yes. He's a good TV man. It's like this. Say you own a company and as an employer, you pay you're employees and they do their job. Well, sometimes a pat on their back for doing their job the way they're supposed to do means more than a raise. And you'll find out that the better relationship you have, the more you're going to get out of your product from these people. That's why I'm with the Japanese. It makes sense to me.

END NOTES

Kip Frey...

Boy, oh boy was Kip Frey thrown into the lion's pit with only a slingshot to defend himself. He was an honest, likable person who had been given this "opportunity" to turn around a wrestling company. He believed honesty, common sense, and an ability to listen would be enough.

In this interview a couple months into his short run as WCW V.P., those qualities came across. He was the first executive in the industry to even make an honest attempt at addressing the steroid issue, yet he showed that he was a bit too trusting and naive to make it work. Look at his Marcus Bagwell example for evidence of that. Kip wanted to believe people. The corporate structure of TBS has evolved to the point that such an attitude would be broken down and destroyed.

He didn't know who to trust and who not to trust, but he did listen to everyone. Then Jim Ross worked his magic and next thing you knew, Bill Watts and Jim Ross were running the company and Frey had been transferred.

Verne Gagne...

As opposed to Jim Crockett, Verne Gagne was bitter and out of touch. The interview with Verne was actually the first "Torch Talk" I ever conducted, which was actually quite a start considering his stature at that time and dating back over the previous few decades.

His comments, especially about Bruiser Brody, really made people aware of the "Torch Talk" forum instantly. And his biting comments about Hulk Hogan and Vince McMahon quickly established the "Torch Talk" forum.

After a few insider questions that were not the norm for the usual puff-piece magazine style interview, Verne broke stride and asked me, "What did you say your name was?"

Verne is now living in Minnesota in retirement, having filed for bankruptcy a few years ago. He was recently interviewed on a local news station and showed little knowledge of the current wrestling scene, but enough to broadly criticize it for the direction it has gone.

Eddie Gilbert...

More than Verne Gagne, Eddie Gilbert was the one who helped put the words "Torch Talk" on the map in the industry as a must-read newsmaking forum.

Gilbert was the first person to prominently break kayfabe, i.e. acknowledge the inner-workings of the industry. Gilbert, like Paul E. Dangerously, came up through the ranks of fanzines and photography, so he felt at home talking to a newsletter. He did draw the line in his interviews at talking about match finishes as predetermined, but otherwise was as open as anyone had been.

Part of the reason he was cast as an outsider was because of his openness with the maturing

legitimate wrestling press. It is more fair to say, though, that his dealings with the press were more a product of being an outcast. Gilbert wasn't always honest in his interviews either. Because the other side (the "evil establishment") wasn't cooperating with the press, he felt safe giving perhaps a slanted version of his side of the story knowing the other side wouldn't "lower themselves" to responding.

Nonetheless in the interviews what came across as much as anything was Gilbert's love for the business and eagerness to make a difference. What he lacked was the wisdom to work within the system and the patience to wait his turn. He truly believed his turn wouldn't come unless he spoke out, but it turned out speaking out didn't help him. It may have helped the industry be more aware that there was a younger generation clamoring for their fair share of power, but he for a wide variety of reasons, his interviews being a small factor overall, never made it to a stable power structure position in a major company.

When Eddie Gilbert died earlier this year in Puerto Rico, wrestling lost a member of its fraternity—an often ostracized member—who would defend the industry on the whole as diligently as anyone, as these two "Torch Talks" with him clearly showed.

Tod Gordon...

At the time of this interview, Tod Gordon seemed somewhere between being amazed at where he was in wrestling (i.e. marking out over the fact that he was promoting shows and hanging out with wrestlers) and being eager to be taken seriously and wanting to expand his role. He even acknowledged his growing process, talking about how he wasn't such an easy mark for wrestlers demanding big payoffs. Veiled by his outward optimism and excitement, there was also a sense, because Paul E. Dangerously's long-term loyalties at the time lay with Jim Crockett, that he wasn't sure what the future of ECW was.

He seemed for the most part honest, although the figure of 1,491 he gave as the "record attendance" at the time for ECW Arena hurt his credibility since independent headcounts didn't pass 800. (Much later he would say that a show attended by 1,200 was the new record, admitting the past 1,491 figure to be untrue.)

Hawk...

The interview with Hawk was another pleasant surprise. He came across as very honest on most subjects, a man with deep emotions, and he provided insight on almost every promotion and key personality, from Jesse Ventura to Vince McMahon to Scott Steiner.

The interview came at a time when Hawk seemed to be evaluating his career, looking at his options, and showing signs of hunger and a desire to prove himself that many who had experienced his fame would have lost years earlier.

